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JAN.

Ace-High W TERN IES

HEAD 'EM WEST OF HELL!

by **D. B. NEWTON**

OVERHOLSER · LATHAM
SCHUYLER · CRUICKSHANK

For once they actually agree!

Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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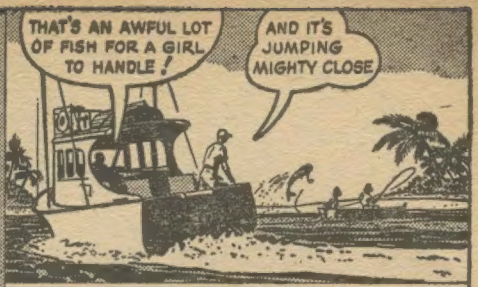
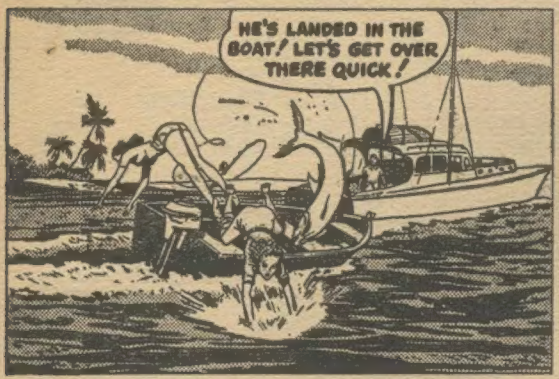


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

MEN, THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT SHAVES THAT ARE CLEAN, COMFORTABLE AND GOOD-LOOKING. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, TOO. THAT MEANS YOU ARE PROTECTED AGAINST SCRAPING AND IRRITATION. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE

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Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

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All Stories New—No Reprints

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★ Out-Trail Caravan ★

PRAIRIE ROSE was as temperamental as she was talented and beautiful. As the star entertainer in the Blacknight Saloon, in Ellsworth, Kansas, she demanded absolute silence and respect from the audience as she sang her pretty and sentimental songs. This was asking a lot in a lively and roaring little cowtown in the 70's.

"Now gents," Prairie Rose would say, just before she started to do her act, "I don't aim to strain my windpipe to make myself heard over th' rattle of poker chips and a lot of loud talk. I want quiet. So th' first person that makes a sound while I'm renderin' my song will get a slug right between th' eyes." On this announcement, Rose would bring up the six-shooter she had been holding behind her back, and place it handily on the top of Professor Hadley's battered piano.

The regular habitues of the Blacknight knew that Prairie Rose meant exactly what she said. They also knew she was a crack shot, as she had been born and raised on the frontier. Once in awhile, though, a stranger in those parts would brashly interrupt Rose's song.

Rose would stop singing immediately, pick up her gun, and either shoot a glass out of the heckler's hand, or shoot the heels off his boots as he dashed for the exit after the first surprising shot.

Rose's favorite pastime was listening to old Professor Hadley, the piano player, tell her stories that he had read in books. The prof had seen better days, before he drifted west, and could keep Prairie Rose entertained by the hour, with his classical yarns of Old England.

The professor's yarns were welcomed by many of the cowboys, gamblers and bartenders, too, but none were as interested as Prairie Rose, and he told them especially for her benefit and approval.

One evening, after most of the revelers had departed, a small crowd was ganged around the professor. They listened with approval as he unfolded the story of Lady Godiva. But, for once, Prairie Rose wasn't impressed. She didn't think it was much.

"Look, Prof," she said. "You say this gal's husband was kind of a ramrod for an old English town, and kept raisin' th' poor people's taxes right along? An' this Lady Godiva, wantin' to help th' people, told her husband that if he didn't lower th' taxes she would ride through th' streets of Coventry on a white horse, an' without no clothes on?"

"That's right," said Professor Hadley. "Only, remember that an order was sent out that any one who did not stay indoors during her ride was to be beheaded. No one was even permitted to peek out a window at her. This was her husband's strict order. Also, Lady Godiva had real long hair, that she draped around her, nearly covering her nakedness."

Prairie Rose shook her head in disgust. "It don't make sense," she said. "Anyhow, why should the people want to look at her—didn't they never see a white horse before?"

"I fear you miss the point, Rose—" the professor said.

"No I don't!" Rose cut in. "But to show you I don't think Lady Godiva did so much, I will do the same thing, right here in Ellsworth."

The cowboys cheered this announcement.

True to her word, the following day, at noon, Prairie Rose strolled down Main Street without a stitch of clothes on. In each hand she carried a gun. But the citizens—knowing Rose as they did—were careful to remain inside the houses and buildings. All blinds were drawn, and doors closed. Those places—in the majority—that did not boast window blinds, stretched pieces of thick cloth over all places through which Prairie Rose might be looked at. Nobody ventured to steal a look at Rose, during her strange stroll, as they realized it might be the last thing they would ever be able to look at.

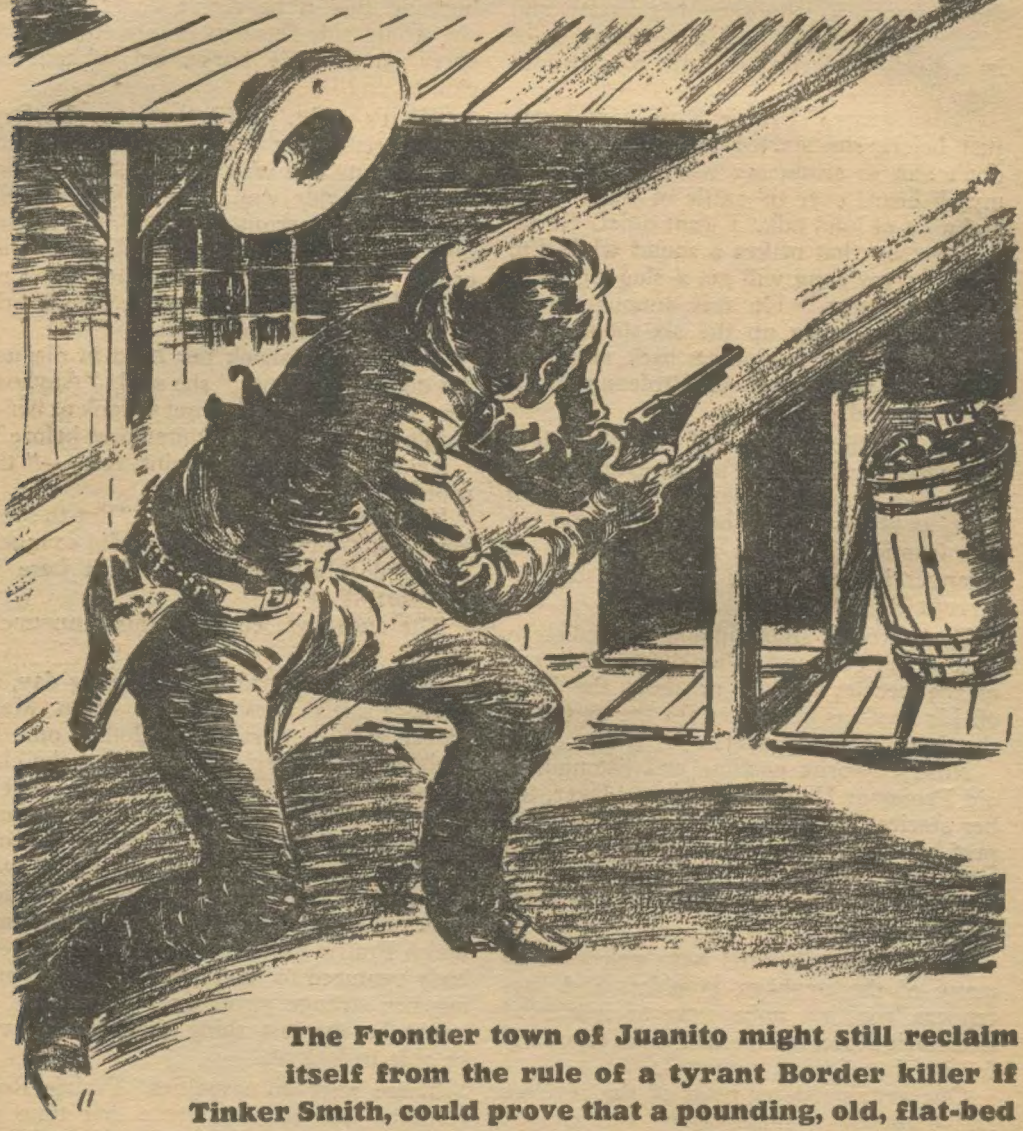
There were no casualties. Prairie Rose collected her bet, and from that time on the town of Ellsworth proudly claimed fame as the home of the "Lady Godiva of the Plains!"

—JOHN T. LYNCH.

ONE LAST TOWN TO TAME

Smashing Frontier Novel

By WILLIAM SCHUYLER



The Frontier town of Juanito might still reclaim itself from the rule of a tyrant Border killer if Tinker Smith, could prove that a pounding, old, flat-bed press was stronger than a dozen bushwhack rifles—and a quart of printer's ink deadlier than a hundred gallons of spilled blood!

Sid Yerby's big gun roared as the reflection blinded Tinker.

CHAPTER ONE

Sixgun Serenade

TROUBLE was the remotest thing from Tinker Smith's mind. He was heading home at last after ten zestful years as a roving gun-smith, part-time cowpuncher and member of many posses. Tinker had wanted excitement and freedom when he had been mustered out of the volunteer cavalry ten years before, and he had found it aplenty. Now he was ready for home and friends—friends like Bill Cochran and Russ Tate, his captain and sergeant in the cavalry days. They had

settled down in Juanito when Tinker had hit the trail.

Longingly now, Tinker looked down on the little town of Juanito sitting snug in the cottonwood shade in a wide bend of the Redknife River. It was late afternoon and the sun was ending its scorching vigil over the still houses and parched streets. Hot as it was, it was a beautiful sight to a man coming home. Tinker's bay and the dun pack animal that followed, caught this excitement and broke into a trot for the last half-mile.

When Tinker entered the west end of Main Street he set about to do what he had planned for miles and miles: give his animals a drink, and get one for himself. While the horses dipped their muzzles at the trough, the trail-hard gun-smith had his first look around.

Juanito looked different. Tinker frowned as he led the horses over to a tie-rail. This tie-rail should have been in front of the old Redknife Saloon. There was no sign of the Redknife. In its place stood a new clapboard structure, two stories high and painted with a bold red name: Flying Aces Saloon. Tinker tethered the tired animals and stood in the ankle-deep dust to get a better look. The whole west end of Main Street was different. There was another new building directly across from the Flying Aces—looked like it would be a hotel when finished. That wasn't all. Overhead, stretched across the street were two long white banners painted with large black letters. A faint breeze took the slack from them and Tinker read their message:—SID YERBY FOR SHERIFF—and—SID YERBY, THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE—.

Tinker shrugged and wondered about the changes a few years could bring. He glanced on down the street. Except for the signs and the noisy, new saloon, Juanito seemed pretty much the same as he remembered it.

Tinker beat some of the dust off his clothes and eased through the batwings of the Flying Aces. He slipped his wiry six-foot length into a space at the bar between an oldster and a group of drunks who were talking earnestly about nothing in particular. The bartender caught his sign and pushed a bottle and a small glass to him. Tinker took a shot of the red before he had a look around the gaudy saloon.

A quick gander at the stuffy, smoke-filled room showed him a crowd of cowpokes and separate groups of bearded, tired-looking men who could be nothing but miners. Smith guessed they'd found silver up in the San Juan Range to the south. That was something new too. He began to feel even more like a stranger when his glance took in the unfamiliar aspect of the place. A long mirror and several pictures of under-dressed and over-fed women hung on the wall behind the bar; and the bar itself was shiny new mahogany. There was a citified brass rail too, and a number of big spitoons stood around, badly stained by carelessly aimed tobacco juice and yellowed remnants of cigarette papers. The evening gloom of the place was dispelled when the bartender lit the brass lamp hanging over the bar.

Even with the better light Tinker failed to see a familiar face. He began to think he'd been away too long and this wasn't home after all. He had lots of questions to ask. He turned to the man on his left.

The stooped graybeard was engrossed in his drink, which he gripped in grimy blackened hands as if someone were going to steal it. He smelled like a man who slept in his clothes. The man did seem to be an oldtimer who might have some information, though, so Tinker decided to give him a try.

"I been away a while, partner." Tinker wore his most genial smile. "Could you tell me if Russ Tate and Cochran are still around?"

The watery blue eyes of the man peered nervously at Tinker for a brief moment and quickly returned to contemplate the tumbler of whiskey. Tinker waited. When there was no answer he decided to try another approach. He was framing another question when the man spoke:

"Tate's around."

"And Cochran?"

The old man was tight with words and answered in his own time. "Which one?"

"The owner of the San Juan Gazette, Bill Cochran."

The blue eyes flickered at Tinker again. The stained fingers clutched the glass harder. The question seemed to hurt the man and his voice shook as he answered: "William Cochran died a week ago." He

addressed this more to his glass than to Tinker.

Tinker Smith felt the joy of his homecoming fade completely. *His captain, Fighting Bill Cochran, the best newspaper man in the West—dead! Impossible!* "He wasn't that old," he protested.

The old man looked hard at Tinker and commented bitterly, "You don't have to be old to die of a hole in your head!"

Sudden hot anger swept through Tinker's body. He grabbed the man's arm and snapped his next words, "Bill Cochran was the best friend I ever had! Who shot him?"

The grimy man was plainly nervous and annoyed. He tried to shake off Tinker's hold. "Son, if you were a friend of his you're talking too loud in the wrong place."

"The hell with that! Who did it?"

Tinker's strong fingers closed tighter; the man was forced to answer. "Sid Yerby," he said softly as if in warning.

"Who is this Yerby?" Tinker's voice, in his anger, was louder. He didn't notice that the room was suddenly quieter. He didn't care. He wasn't aware of the man standing at his shoulder until he heard a new voice enter the conversation.

"I'm Sid Yerby, Slim. You're in my saloon and my town. And who are you?" Tinker wheeled to face the big voice and see the man who had shot his friend and claimed to own Juanito. Blue Eyes hunched over his drink to make himself inconspicuous.

Tinker took a long moment to size up this man and bring himself under control. The man was big. Very big, and prosperous. He wore a generous smile, pinned to his face like a badge. The smile would be disarming if a man didn't notice the tight set of the teeth behind it. Everything about him was on a big scale. His giant nose; massive dark brows; wide-set black eyes. Stiff black hair grew vigorously on his great head and on the backs of his wide hands and in between the knuckles of his fingers. His thumbs were hooked in the armholes of his elegant vest. His coat was of the best material and hung perfectly from his shoulders but revealed the bulge of a shoulder gun. Tinker noted this and also the hilt of a knife winking from the darkness under the great coat.

"Smith's my handle." Tinker was relaxed now and spoke slowly and distinctly. He meant to let the big man do the talking but he heard himself say, "Thanks for saving me the trouble of hunting up the man who killed Bill Cochran." Tinker had had plenty of experience in enemy territory before and knew he shouldn't say that. And this was enemy territory. He could sense it viewing the crowd—the way they sided Yerby and their eager look. Tinker knew he wouldn't have a chance against this mob, but more important to him, he knew he could gun the man who'd shot Bill Cochran before that shoulder hardware ever left its holster.

Yerby made no move. The smile never left his face as he casually inspected the tall leanness of this outspoken stranger. He spoke condescendingly, as if Tinker had made a pardonable error: "You've got the wrong idea Smith."

"Maybe."

"It's none of your damn business, Smith, but Cochran was shot in self-defense. He threw down on me in the middle of Main Street." Yerby put more of an edge on his voice.

"I wasn't there," Smith said, coldly eyeing the giant man, "But I know Bill Cochran. He wouldn't go looking for gun trouble." That was putting it plain enough, Tinker thought. He expected to see Yerby's right hand flash for his gun. It didn't, and the smile didn't change.

Yerby could take his time. He spoke again, giving the newcomer one more chance to back out:

"Smith, you look like an honest man so I'm going to put you straight." Yerby turned so that he half faced the crowd around them as well as Tinker. "Cochran and that yellow journal of his were getting too big for this town. He wasn't satisfied with regular news so he started printing lies; lies that were a menace to Juanito and the honest progressive citizens who are building this country to what it should be." He took in his audience with a grand gesture. Tinker, for his part, didn't notice any particular signs of honesty and progress in these faces. One stocky, splay-nosed man flanked Yerby with a hand resting on the butt of his gun. Yerby continued in his politician's voice: "Cochran was a fool; fool enough to accuse me and

my colleagues of range-hogging, claim-jumping and even murder! When honest men wouldn't listen to him he tried to gun me. I gave him what I'll give any ranny who stands in my way!" He looked to the crowd for approval. They nodded. He concluded with a threat in his tone: "That's the way it was, Smith. You can take it or leave it."

Tinker didn't hesitate. He answered the threat softly and easily, "I'll leave it. That kind of talk don't sit right with me."

The pock-marked man fingered the grip of his Colt, but still there was no move for Yerby's gun. Instead, with the timing of a professional fighter, he brought his left fist straight from his vest to Smith's chin. Not a hard blow, but on the point and with about two hundred and fifteen pounds of man behind it.

"Is that more convincing?" he asked.

Tinker's back slammed against the lip of the bar and the lights went out of his eyes for a moment.

TINKER SMITH had mixed it plenty in his thirty-two years and now his muscular body rolled away from the next punch even though his hazy eyes could not see it. He shook his head to clear his vision as he moved along the bar. He saw his big opponent close in.

Levering away from the bar Tinker went inside Yerby's right hand and drove a punishing blow under the heart. Yerby acknowledged the force of the punch with a grunt but answered with fast lefts on Tinker's lowered head. They were like whacks from a mallet but the spring-steel gun-smith absorbed them and tried crowding the bigger man with a lightning attack. Tinker's speed gave him a momentary advantage and opened Yerby's guard. Tinker crouched and turned loose his Sunday punch. It was good but Yerby was a rock. He shifted his balance slightly and with an ease not accustomed in big men, and with perfect timing, he brought his wide hairy left around in a long hook. Smith felt the crush of the mahogany once more in his back.

For the next minute it was Tinker's full job to stay away from a deluge of wicked punches. He knew he couldn't slug it out with this man, toe to toe. He would have to find some weakness and that seemed impossible. Yerby was as fast and smart as he was big.

Bobbing and weaving, Tinker kept his head out of range while he studied the giant's style. Soon he discovered that Yerby was all for the offense, depending on his extra height and reach to serve for defense. Being as big as he was he had found most men easy to floor before they got inside his long punches.

Tinker's elusiveness made Yerby impatient. He came in faster. Tinker played a dangerous game, drawing the big man in and watching each feint or punch for a signal. He was clipped on the ear a few times for his trouble. At last he got the routine: If he fell back, Yerby would come in fast, throw a long left out as a feeler, and keep his powerful right cocked low for a crusher. When he did this his chin hung out like a lantern. Always there was the left before anything else; the left and the chin as big as a barn door.

Tinker ducked, gave ground and maneuvered the fight to the spot by the cast iron stove in the middle of the room. He gave another step back. The long left came out like a wagon-tongue, the chin was inviting. Tinker moved to the left and inside the feeler-punch, uncoiling everything he had in his right hand. The big chin snapped around like the crack of a whip, throwing Yerby violently out of balance. The cocked right hand came up protectively. Tinker jammed another hard right to the heart and Yerby stumbled awkwardly into the cold stove, raking the knuckles of his left hand and the left side of his face on the rusty iron. His huge foot caught under the low fender and twisted. He pushed himself free and started for Tinker. The lean man was ready. He played for the left again, counting on Yerby following habit. Yerby did and Tinker slammed him back into the stove.

Yerby was breathing hard and bleeding from his mouth and a long cut on his chin. The men who had been gloating over the beating Tinker was getting were suddenly silent and ominous.

Tinker was ready to move into Yerby for the finish when the splay-nosed man reached for his gun. Tinker crouched and drew, drilling the man where he stood. Tinker wheeled toward Yerby to avenge Bill Cochran.

Yerby's gun flashed into his hand, but at this instant a .45 in Blue Eyes' hand exploded and the saloon was drenched in darkness. Tinker made his retreat toward the batwings and could smell the grimy old man moving beside him. He threw a parting shot in Yerby's direction. He saw a half a dozen flashes in answer. Blue Eyes folded with a gasp.

"Beat it Smith! I can't make it," was all he said.

Tinker cursed and left. Once outside he scrambled for the place where he had tied his bay. Mysteriously, he felt himself lifted free of the ground by four strong hands, and before he could wrench himself loose he was fitting the familiar grooves of his own saddle. A rasping voice out of the past said, "Sit here corporal." Someone slapped the rump of his horse hard and the spooked animal broke away fast.

The voice again: "Get on the neck o' that sorry nag and stay with us, Smith!" There was a familiar ring to it but Tinker had no time to think as he and his unexplained companions slammed down the street. A scattered volley of shots sang past them and they snapped around into the first side alley. A series of tight turns around buildings and barns and then a long straightaway run brought them to the other end of Juanito, near the Redknife.

If they had any pursuers they lost them quickly. At a sign from one of the men they reined up in the midst of the town dump where the night stillness was broken only by the bleating of goats rummaging in the garbage and tins.

The nut-grater voice spoke again: "Well Corporal Smith, welcome home!"

Tinker peered hard in the weak starlight to see if he was right. Yes, that craggy face could belong to nobody but his old cavalry sergeant, Russ Tate. At last here was a friend; Juanito was not dead. "Sarge, you money-hungry side-winder, is this where you meet your friends, or are you takin' goats in your hotel? What's happened to this town?"

"Ain't you heard of Sid Yerby?"

"You mean that over-grown hombre I had the ruckus with just now?"

"That's the one. Did you wing him?"

"Nope. Don't think so."

"Well he still owns the town then, or most of it. Bullies the rest—'cept me. Controls all the water in the valley. Got his brand plastered on most everybody's steers. His mob jumps claims for him in the San Juan diggin'. And what he can't buy at his price he takes. He and his sidekick Bart killed a half-dozen men I guess." Tate chuckled grimly and concluded. "He's what's happened to this town. And now he's grabbin' the sheriff's office to make it legal-like."

"Things are lookin' up for Mr. Yerby," Tinker remarked without humor, then asked, "What's this mularkey about Yerby killing Bill Cochran in self-defense?"

Tate was quiet and the third man pulled his horse up closer to the others. Tate turned to him and said, "Cap'n Bill's son here can tell you about that, Tinker. Shake hands with Bland Cochran—he was just a button when you saw him last. He's a chip off the old block."

Tinker couldn't see the young man's face in the darkness but he felt his firm handshake and could hear the sure tones of another Cochran voice when he spoke.

"Glad to meet you Smith," he said and then explained what had happened to the former cavalry captain and fiery owner and publisher of the crusading San Juan Gazette:

"You see, Dad had Yerby spotted for a crook right from the first and was riding him plenty hard in the Gazette. Yerby took it pretty good at first and even tried to make friends. Dad insulted him to his face and then published the story in his next issue. Yerby tried ignoring him. That didn't work. Then Yerby decided Dad and his Gazette were getting dangerous— I remember that day he came into the office with that big smile and offered to buy Dad out, for much more money than the paper's worth. That time Dad just laughed in his face.

"Next came the threats; unsigned letters and stuff. Dad laughed again and wrote up the whole story for his paper."

"Just like the Captain, eh Sarge?" Tinker put in.

Tate nodded. "He never changed a whit."

Young Cochran went on: "Yes that's the way he always did. If he set his mind against something, he stuck with it to the finish. A man like Yerby couldn't take that and was bound to blow up sooner or

later. That's what Dad wanted and he figured he could take care of himself when the showdown came. But he didn't know Yerby as well as he thought."

"What happened?" Tinker asked.

"Well Dad thought Yerby was out of town and got careless. One morning last week—it was Tuesday—Yerby with just his gunhand Steve Bart as a witness, cut Dad down when he was on his way from early breakfast at Tate's Hotel to his office."

"Didn't the Captain even get in one shot?" Tinker asked.

Russ Tate took over the story here. "It was plain murder Tinker. Bill Cochran didn't have his gun. My daughter Bess had just served him his breakfast and heard him say he was gettin' careless, leavin' his gun in his office."

"How come they didn't hang Yerby then?"

Tate frowned and his voice was harsh. "They found Bill's gun by his body and the court, which belonged to Yerby like everything else, threw out Bess's testimony."

Bland Cochran cut in: "I figure Steve Bart sneaked in the Gazette and got the gun to frame the murder." Tinker could see Cochran stiffen in his saddle. "I'm going to get those two killers!"

"You tried tonight, boy, only Tinker was there first," Tate said.

"But I didn't get the job done," Tinker complained, and then he asked, "Who was the old codger that sided for me and blew the light?"

"Inky Simpkins," Bland answered, "Dad's old assistant and handy man. I was out to get Yerby tonight, and Inky was there to cover for me when I made my play. Guess he thought it was funny when you showed up in my place. He was shot wasn't he?"

Tinker nodded.

"Let's cut the palaver gents," Tate broke in, spurring his mount. "And get over to the paper. Tinker, you can help me and Bland run the last edition of Bill Cochran's San Juan Gazette tonight. We've run proof on it and it's a dinger! Before he was shot, Bill got together some mighty strong stuff against Yerby and was fixin' to print it tomorrow, election day."

Tinker was puzzled. "What's the point of an election with no opposition candidate?"

Tate answered him as they rode along back lots to the rear of the Gazette office: "I dunno. Maybe Yerby thinks the people will fall for his banners and promises even though he knows the whole country is scared of him and no man will risk his neck to run against him,"—he paused significantly—"Unless maybe it'd be you!"

Smith was surprised at the suggestion but it secretly appealed to him.

"Why me?" he asked.

"I figger you've come home now and maybe you'll want a steady payin' job."

Tinker made no remark but he thought it would be good to hang Yerby as his first official duty.

The trio arrived quietly at the rear of the Gazette and ground-reined their horses. They let themselves in the back door soundlessly.

They surprised a man who was stooping on the floor near the big hand press. He had a match cupped in his hand and was reading the proof sheet of the paper. He snuffed the match when he heard the men enter and made a stumbling dash for the front door. Tinker's light gun flashed into his hand but he could not see to shoot. He felt Bland Cochran leave his side with a rush and a whispered warning. "Don't fire, I'll stop him!"

Tinker and Russ Tate could barely discern the form of the intruder running around the end of the counter that split the office, banging into a chair and a box on his way. Young Cochran, agile and familiar with every obstacle in the room, took a short cut, vaulted the counter and leaped feet first into the bulk that raced for the door. There was a grunt of exhausted breath and then the smack of fist against bone.

Tate found a light and they all inspected Cochran's knocked-out victim. Cochran spoke, rising and rubbing his knuckles, "Steve Bart—getting a look at the paper for Yerby."

Tinker fondled his light, small-caliber revolver. "Is this the hombre who had a hand in murderin' Bill Cochran?"

"Yep," Tate said.

Tinker poised the gun. "I'd better give it to him now. This pea-shooter is mighty quiet and we could cut down the opposition some."

Cochran restrained him. "He needs kill-

ing all right but we can't do it now. Can't have a murder on our hands; not unless we get the big boy himself."

"No, don't shoot him now," Tate agreed. "We might want to ask him some questions later. We'll tie him in my stable back of the hotel and get some chuck from Bess before we dig into this work."

They bound and gagged Bart and reconnoitered the dim street before they took him across. They carried his inert form erect between them like a drunken friend. The street seemed deserted but they didn't arouse suspicion by looking up and down.

They could not see the figure which detached itself from a building next to the hotel and scurried away as they passed.

When they had deposited Bart deep in a corner stall, Tinker spotted his dun pack horse browsing on a bale of alfalfa. The pack was still tied securely.

Tate explained: "I cut his reins from the rail before we picked you up, figgerin' he was yours. He just drifted to where he smelled hay."

CHAPTER TWO

Hell-for-Election

TATE led the way into the spacious kitchen of his hotel. A beautiful girl ran to greet him and then threw her arms around Cochran, unashamed. When she spoke to him her brown eyes were full of love and concern.

"I heard shots a long time ago, Bland, and I've died a thousand deaths waiting for you. Did you kill Yerby? I just know he's been laying for you ever since he shot your Dad."

Cochran shook his head.

Tinker saw for the first time what a fine looking man young Cochran was, a little taller than his father had been but with the same fine eyes and high, intelligent forehead. It was a moment before Tinker recognized that this fresh, pretty girl in Cochran's arms was the grown-up edition of the little pig-tailed Bess Tate he'd seen ten years before.

"Bland was too busy helping me out of a scrape with Yerby to get a shot in for himself, Miss Bess." Tinker said, and Bess noticed him for the first time. A quick light came into her soft, lovely eyes.

"Why you're Tinker Smith," she exclaimed and put her hands in his impulsively. "I'd remember you anywhere. How often Pa has said he wished he had Corporal Smith here to help them out against Sid Yerby. Pa's always telling how Captain Cochran could send the rest of the troop back to camp if he had you and Pa. You are here to help aren't you?" The lovely girl appealed to him with her honest eyes. "Of course you are. Why I'll polish up Pa's saber and you can muster another volunteer cavalry." She was a girl of true spirit and courage, Tinker thought.

The mention of his saber brought old times back to Tate, and Tinker could almost guess what was in the old man's mind. Tinker said, "I'll bet you're thinkin' of that time we signalled for reinforcements with that saber, eh, Sarge?"

For a minute the two ex-cavalry men were in a world of their own.

"Just like a regular heliograph it was," Tate recalled, relishing the memories of the old days. "Remember, we got the men and then we chased old Chief Black Horse clean up into Canada. Old Black Horse liked that fight—the sides were pretty even—and later he made Cap'n Cochran a blood brother."

"Why don't we chase Chief Yerby out," Cochran offered. He knew how the old sergeant liked to gab about old times. He wanted them to get back to the business at hand.

"Suits me fine," exclaimed Tate. "If we can get Tinker to run for sheriff we can get all the decent citizens behind us."

"Sure. And we'll put a new paper out tonight,"—Bland kept the ball rolling—"All new. And when the people see that Tinker Smith is back and ready to buck Yerby, they'll get out and vote; or fight! Are you in, Tinker?"

Tinker felt the blood race in his veins. He'd never been a man to look up a fight—or back away either. Certainly he was disappointed to find Juanito wasn't the peaceful spot he'd looked forward to for ten years—many's the time he'd dreamed and planned about setting up a gun-smith's shop on Main Street and swapping lies with the oldtimers. But it was clear now that he couldn't have that dream the way things stood. He'd have to fight to get what he

wanted. And he knew he was ready. Ready and eager to have another round with that big, smiling Yerby! This time one of them wouldn't walk away.

Tinker still found it hard to let these people put so much trust in him. Maybe the people had forgotten Tinker Smith, maybe they wouldn't care to make a wandering gun-smith into a sheriff. He walked over to the stove to pour himself some coffee before he answered. The heavy pot was hot in his hands and he held it carefully, thinking how homesick the rich aroma of hot coffee made him. His reverie was abruptly broken.

"Drop Corporal!" Tate shouted.

Tinker dropped. The big pot clattered onto the stove and a sheath knife pierced it with a clean 'ping'. Smith's gun was out and the light smack of a small caliber cartridge showed he was in action. The open window was empty. The scuff of running feet in the dust came from the alley outside. Tinker didn't hesitate. He was through the window and after the knife thrower. Firing fast in their direction, he could see two shapes making for the back corner of the next building. The man leading the retreat was very big. Bland Cochran followed Tinker through the window and raced with him after the men. At the corner they knew it was no use. The men had disappeared in the silent blackness. Tinker and Bland both had the same thought at once. They checked at the stable.

"Bart's gone," Cochran said uselessly, when they peered into the empty stall.

"Yeah, and Yerby's warned," Tinker said. "I guess the chips are all in the pot now."

The two of them got back to the kitchen, Tinker walked over to inspect the knife that had so narrowly missed him. He hefted it and smiled at Tate. "Thanks for the warning Sarge."

"Guess you never forgot how to take orders," Tate said.

Tinker looked at the shiny butt of the knife's handle. "Yerby was wearing a knife like this in the saloon tonight, I saw it under his coat."

"And I saw that big ring of his in the window just before he turned loose the knife," Cochran said and turned to Tate. "We checked at the stable. Bart's gone."

"Then that was them all right. They figgered to get rid of Tinker real quiet-like."

Tinker needed no more persuading. "That settles it," he announced. "Sid Yerby's got to have a little stiff competition. I'm throwin' my hat in the ring!" He looked at his two campaign managers. "If you can get a petition with enough names to put me in the runnin', you can say anything you want in that paper of yours; I'll back it with my life!"

Tate clapped his hand on Tinker's shoulder. "I know how we can get that petition." He turned to his daughter. "Bess, you go look up Lawyer Jenkins. You and Jenkins write up a petition and take it around to the men we can trust. You ought to be able to get it back here before we finish runnin' the paper."

Bess smiled, kissed her father and Bland, and was gone.

Tinker closed the meeting. "I'll pick up a little hardware from my pack horse. Think we'll have a call from Yerby's gunslicks while we're gettin' out the paper."

TINKER SMITH sat on a box by the front door of the San Juan Gazette, leaving it slightly ajar. The back door was locked and they relied on the whinny of their horses to warn of any approach from the rear. Tinker's revolver rested on a window ledge in easy reach, his Winchester lay across his knees.

Bland Cochran and Russ Tate were already busy in the shop. They worked with the determination of men with a purpose. The young newspaper man, in the light of a shaded lantern, hurriedly drew up the challenging headlines and the copy for the one-sheet paper. With fingers expert from long apprenticeship under his father, he flicked type from the racks with his right hand and fed them to the stick in his left. Stick by stick he built the page into the form. Locking this, he laid it in the bed of the big hand press. Tate had the stack of newsprint riffled and ready, and through the darkness of the moonless night, he and his future son-in-law worked as a team. Tate fed each single sheet as Bland operated the roller. They got what little sped they could from the reluctant and ancient press.

Tinker kept his trying vigil. Shutting out the noise of the clanking press, he con-

centrated on the street and the town. Only the squeaking of tree locusts and the garumping of frogs at the river broke the sullen stillness of the night outside. Tinker wished for activity; he almost wished for Yerby to make his play now—anything to break the suspense of waiting. The gunsmith's eyes were shot with weariness but he pierced the blackness for any sign of movement. Mostly he watched in the direction of the Flying Aces far up the street to the west. Light came from the saloon in a steady yellow glow but no shadows betrayed any action from that quarter.

Tinker thought of Yerby and how well he knew him in a few hours. A smart man and tricky. Not a man likely to give warning of an attack. After hearing what Bart had learned Yerby would know the paper had not been run and would time his attack to catch them when they were exhausted from the night's work. Tinker privately cursed himself for not plugging Bart when they caught him.

Tinker was thinking like this and slapping his neck to keep awake when he heard Tate speak: "Ink her up boy, only twenty more to run!"

This happy announcement brought Tinker up with a jerk. He rose from his box seat and stretched the Winchester out in front of him to pull the cricks from his back. Twenty hours without sleep told on a man. An hour more would see dawn. Maybe Yerby would be too late to act.

As if this thought were a signal for action, Smith heard a rush of noise at the back of the building. The sharp whinny of a horse came simultaneously. With a shattering crash the back door snapped off its hinges and banged to the floor. Four men, arms wrapped around a large pine log, burst into the shop. Two others followed closely, throwing lead wildly from guns in each hand. Another ran in, armed with a bundle of dripping rags and a can. These he tossed toward the wooden counter.

Smith swept the lamp to the floor and leapt to the shelter of the counter. As a match was hastily thrown at the kerosene-drenched rags, Tinker saw Tate fall under the withering blaze of six-guns. Smith was partially protected by the counter, Cochran by the press, and they were already adding to the clamor with their guns, using muzzle flashes for targets. More than one gun was silenced by Tinker's deadly popgun.

The match quickly ignited the rags and the attackers made for a speedy exit. Smith shot one of them and his gun was empty. He snatched his rifle and hoped to throw one more shot at the last fleeing figure. Before he could bring the Winchester up there was a short, violent burst of fire outside, and in the flame from the rags, Smith and Cochran saw Steve Bart stagger to the doorway and crumble there.

A shout followed, "Don't shoot, it's us, Tom Jaynes and Ed! We got the rest of 'em."

When old Jaynes and his son entered over the body of Bart, the counter of the Gazette office and a pile of waste newsprint were roaring with flame. The clothes of one of the four corpses on the floor were afire.

The men didn't greet each other but fell to with coats, hats and saddle blankets to abate the flames. Smith hooked the barrel of his rifle through the handle of the punctured kerosene can which was pouring fuel to the inferno. He carried it through the door to the back lot.

The first tinge of dawn showed before the four of them stomped the last threatening spark. Through it all, old Tate sat propped up against the press stand, a twisted bandana stopping the flow of blood from the shots in his leg. He waved aside all attempts to help him.

Finally, when the singed men were leaning against the blackened wall to catch their breath, Tate said gruffly, "They flanked us, corporal, but it was the best damn volunteer fire department I ever seen in action!" He patted a stack of finished newspapers behind him. "Yerby's crowd gave us a deal of trouble tonight but we got the ammunition right here to lick 'em." He picked up a sample Gazette and read:

TINKHAM 'TINKER' SMITH—SURPRISE CANDIDATE FOR SHERIFF
Yerby to get Stiff Competition From Cavalry Hero Smith

Juanito oldtimers will remember the straight-shooting, right-thinking Tinker Smith."

The gun-smith looked embarrassed and said, wiping the blood from a raw wound on his wrist, "Mighty near didn't have yourselves a candidate, or a paper."

Spry, iron-gray Tom Jaynes, who had been sheriff until Yerby had made a mockery of the office, went to the front door and looked into the growing light. "Somebody's comin' from the river end of town." He looked hard again and then turned to Tate. "It's your Bess with Lawyer Jenkins. Looks like they got what they were after. Jenkins has them petitions in his hand and is wearin' a smile on that long face o' his."

The other men, fagged from the night's ordeal, were revived by the sight of Bess Tate. She bounded into the office, well ahead of the stooped figure of Jenkins, full of the story of their canvass of Juanito's honest citizens.

Bess stopped short at the sight of her wounded father. Her joy changed to terror as she ran to him. The old ex-sergeant held the girl close and soon assured her that the bullets had hit no bones and that he would be all right. Bess wiped away her tears, and told enthusiastically about how she and Jenkins had routed out every man who had reason to hate Yerby.

"We told them that Tinker Smith had come back home to run for sheriff. That was all they needed," she said.

"Every man all the way to the head of the valley was glad to hear the news," Jenkins added. "They're all mounted and armed and they're gathered across the river in the willows right now. They are ready for anything you say."

Tate slapped his good thigh. "There's your troop, Corporal. Use 'em!"

Tinker did not join in the enthusiasm. His face was serious. "You know what this means, Sarge?"

"It means we can wipe 'em out!"

"Not without spilling a lot of blood, Sarge. It's all right for me to risk my neck but there's no reason to drag the whole county into it." He pointed toward the river. "Those men out there have families."

Tate was angry. "Every man out there feels just like I do. It's their town and their country. And it's my town too. I've taken two slugs in the leg tonight and I'll gladly take two pounds more if it'll help wipe out Yerby!"

Tinker forced himself to remain calm and waited until he had the attention of those around him. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and yet it contained a definite ultimatum. "Gents and Miss Bess," he said, "If you're loco enough to want me for sheriff then you'll be loco enough to do this my way. I've got a plan that will save a lot of lead throwin' and get the same results."—the girl and the men looked expectant—"Bland, you bring me a couple of pine boards and a saw. Bess, I'd be obliged if you would get a copy of the Gazette and a big piece of that blank newsprint and a pencil. Lawyer Jenkins, if you would help me with what's left of Mr. Steve Bart here, I've got one thing I'd like him to do for us before he's laid away in boothill." Tinker gave his friends no chance to question his move. He lifted Bart's body across his shoulders and took it to a skittish horse that was tethered in the back lot. While Jenkins held a neck handkerchief over the bronc's eyes Tinker sat the dead Bart in the saddle and trussed him tightly in an erect position.

THE gloom of dawn filtered through the windows of the Flying Aces Saloon to mix with the yellow light of the single lantern. Yerby, dusty but defiant after his several attempts to annihilate his opposition, stood with his back to the bar addressing his depleted gang. He was making his last campaign speech.

"Boys, you all know my qualifications for the office of Sheriff of this county." The fifteen toughs in front of him grinned and nodded like puppets. "So, we're going to hold the official election right here and now." Yerby took off his big Stetson and laid it on the bar, crown down. "When you elect me unanimously—which you are going to do in a minute by dropping your signatures or marks into my hat here—my first act will be to deputize you. Then, our first duty as Sheriff and posse will be to wipe out the undesirable citizens of this town; namely Cochran and Tate, and one no-good outsider, namely Tinker Smith!"

These campaign promises were interrupted by the sound of a galloping horse on Main Street. The men clawed at their guns and looked through the windows at a strange sight in the pale morning light.

Yerby was the first to recognize Steve Bart, bobbing and swaying in the saddle of the frightened horse. He curtly ordered one of his men to stop the bronc. It took

two to bring the animal under control. While they curbed the bronc's thrashing head with short holds on the reins, the others inspected the limp burden in the saddle.

The dead Bart slumped crookedly to the right and would have been bent double if it had not been for two short pine boards which propped him up in front and behind. His lifeless eyes stared accusingly at his former colleagues. The boards that held him up carried messages for Yerby and his bunch. On the front was a copy of the Gazette, the headlines plainly visible. On the back board was a letter addressed to Yerby in a big bold hand.

Yerby's smile returned as he read the letter aloud:

"Mr. Sidney Yerby,
Candidate for Sheriff,
San Juan County.
Dear Sir:

The voters of this district want to save the expense of an election. They also want their new sheriff to be a good shot.

They therefore request the rival candidates to indulge in target practice on each other at 6:00 A.M. this morning, on Main Street. The winner will be Sheriff of San Juan County.

If you are too yellow to go through with it, you and your gang can get the hell out of this town before the time specified for the target practice.

Respectfully,
T. Smith."

The boldness of the challenge drew curses from the outlaw gang as they returned to the saloon. The color rose in Yerby's neck as he considered the audacity of five men and a girl making such a threat. He had a man scouting the town and knew that everyone had left in terror when the attack was made on the Gazette—everybody except Smith, Tate, Cochran and the Jaynes.

Yerby's crafty mind worked hard. He was not afraid to shoot it out with any man, and he knew that he would be forced to meet Smith to save face. But he could not, now that he was so close to realizing his full ambition, take a chance on a lucky shot ending his career. He had to turn this challenge into a victory. How would he do it? How could he make the odds of single combat stack on his side. He called two of his men:

"Crummy, you and Joe come over here." A tobacco-stained and bearded oldster, and a heavy, swarthy man joined Yerby by a table away from the rest. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty," Joe answered.

"What do you know about this hombre Smith? I know he carries fancy hardware but how good is he?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "I never seen him work boss."

Crummy spat a yellow stream to the floor. "He's damn good. He rode with a posse over on the Powder five years back when I was workin' for Buck Carton. I seen him drill Buck and four others from the saddle. Damn good. But not as good as you Sid."

Yerby ignored the compliment.

Joe spoke. "He'll make a good target, boss. The sun'll be right behind him."

"And it'll shine in my eyes—and that's no good."

"We can fix that, Boss," Joe continued, "And give you odds besides."

"How's that?"

"That's easy. Just send one of the boys up on a roof with a washstand mirror and he can turn the sun right back into Smith's eyes. He can time it so Smith will be blind just before you get in range."

Yerby nodded quick approval. That would give him the little edge he needed.

The discussion was interrupted by the breathless entry of a little nervous man through the back door of the saloon. The man ran up to Yerby, panting and barely able to talk.

"Sit down Ned," Yerby ordered. "What's on your mind?"

Ned collapsed in a chair and explained between gasps. ". . . Run all the way from the river . . . thirty men . . . armed to the ears and talkin' about gettin' you."

Yerby took the information calmly and turned away from the others to think it out. This would change his plans. He was a man accustomed to quick decision and in a moment had made up his mind. He stood up and got the attention of all the men in the room.

"This loud-mouthed ranny, Smith, thinks he's got everything going his way. Ned here says they've got thirty ranchers from up the valley gathered by the river waiting to jump us. I know you men could whip

them but I can't afford to lose any of you. So I've got a plan figured where we can hold four over their full house." He paused for effect. "I was thinking I might shoot Smith like he asked me to, but I hate to kill a man before breakfast; spoils my appetite." He waited for the laugh. "Instead, we're going to let them think they've got us bluffed. We're going to ride out of town like Mr. Smith suggested. They'll get excited and decide to chase us. With our head start we'll lose them in the big arroyo west of town, circle around by the river and come back into town that way. When that bunch of hotheads gets tired of trying to read our sign on the rocks they'll come back. And we'll give them a surprise welcome from the roofs and windows. If Smith gets a little careless and steps in the way of some of our lead, that's his hard luck. I'll be sheriff and we'll have San Juan County sewed up like a bag of salt. Does that suit you." The men, not anxious to shoot it out with the enraged ranchers on even terms, applauded their leader and gloated over the promised ambush. With just the right amount of noise they mounted and rode west at a gallop, looking back furtively to convince any observers that they were running away.

CHAPTER THREE

". . . Bullets Be Damned"

MEANWHILE in the Gazette office, rugged old Russ Tate was busy bandaging his leg. When this was done, he fortified himself with a couple of pulls from a bottle and tried his weight on the leg. The bleeding had stopped and he was satisfied.

"Take more'n that to put me out of action, Corporal," he said. "I recollect the time our lootenant was killed and I led "F" Company forty mile back to Fort Kearney with a Sioux arrowhead in my back." He went to the window at the west corner of the Gazette and gazed down the long expanse of red dust toward Yerby's saloon. "This is a fool stunt you're pullin' Tinker, but the chips are down now and young Cochran's got the men fixed to see to it that the cards ain't stacked. We got to watch that Yerby. He's tricky. He don't play for keeps without he has an iced deck!"

Tinker casually checked the loads in his revolver. "What time is it, Sarge?"

Tate tugged an old silver timepiece from his pocket. "Five to." He turned to look toward the Flying Aces again, in time to see the outlaws making tricks west. "By damn! Look a' that! Them polecats are skeedadlin' out." Tinker, Bess, Lawyer Jenkins and the Jaynes moved to the window. They could plainly see the long plume of dust raised by the fleeing riders.

The old cavalry sergeant took command. "Bess, did you get my saber like I told you?" The girl produced the weapon from the counter. "Good. We got them snakes on the run and we'll keep 'em that way. Ed Jaynes, you ride down to the river and get them men over here fast and tell 'em to keep me in sight; I'm followin' Yerby's bunch right now." Young Jaynes ran for his horse at the back door. "Corporal, you trail me by a quarter mile so's we don't get out of touch with the troop. If they stop to give fight, I'll fall back." The look on Tinker's face stopped the old campaigner.

"They ain't runnin' away Sarge; they're hopin' to pull us out of town."

"The hell they are! They ain't smart like no Injun. They're yellow and runnin'." He was impatient. "You comin' Smith?"

Tinker shook his head. Tate mumbled something about Tinker being a danged traitor and limped out to his horse. Presently, he was seen spurring his big bay gelding to a full gallop away from the rising sun. A wild cavalry yell trailed back to Tnker's ears. The lean gun-smith watched his old friend disappear before he heard the rushing sound of horsemen from across the river. Young Cochran and Jaynes led their charge through the dust of Main Street. In a moment the dust returned to rest and only the morning quiet remained.

Tinker turned. He was alone. Bess and Jenkins and old Jaynes were gone. He sat down to wait for what he knew would come. He smiled at the irony of fate; one minute he was the hero and leader; the next, a traitor and coward. No difference; it was better this way.

That Yerby would return, Tinker did not doubt. He knew the treachery of the man, and yet he could only hope that there was honor enough in Yerby to meet him in a fair fight. Perhaps Yerby would have to

answer his challenge to keep the respect of his men.

The sun rose higher over the badlands across the Redknife. Half an hour, then an hour passed. Tinker began to doubt his judgment. He paced the floor. He began to wonder why he had not ridden with Tate. Tate's leg was worse hurt than he admitted. He might need help. Tinker worried that his old comrade-in-arms might die because he, Tinker, had been headstrong. The thought that he might be the cause of the old man's death gnawed at his mind.

Tinker's thoughts were broken by a distant splashing followed by the thud of horses' hooves. Quickly, the lone defender of Juanito, jumped behind the counter to view the riders without being seen. Yerby came into view, his great white teeth bared in a triumphant smile. Behind him, on lathered horses, rode his gang.

The dusty group reined up in front of the Gazette. Yerby's laugh could be heard clearly through the open door. "Ha! They were in such a hurry they didn't stop to close their doors."

The nervous little man called Ned chimed in: "Shall we fire the Gazette now Sid?"

"No you fool! Plenty of time for fun after we cut them down," Yerby answered. "Did you see old Tate leading his 'cavalry' right smack over our trail and into the hills? They'll poke around up by the mines for an hour and then come dragging back to our trap. We'll give them a smoky welcome home!" Yerby loosed his reins and led the gang down the street.

Tinker moved to the door again and waited. When Yerby and his cohorts were dismounted in front of the Flying Aces, Tinker stepped out into the street. He pointed his gun straight up and fired one round. The bunch at the other end of the street whirled and whipped out their guns. Smith reloaded the empty chamber and holstered his gun. He called: "Hey, Yerby!"

Yerby stepped into the street away from the others.

Smith called again: "Did you forget our target practice?"

Yerby pulled back his coat and stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. His voice, as big as he, could be heard easily. He threw back his head. "Ho! The Traveling Sheriff himself! Did they leave you behind?" His men roared.

Smith stood at ease. Even at a hundred yards Yerby could tell that his enemy was not afraid.

"Well?" Smith asked.

Yerby laughed again. "Don't go away Smith. Sorry I'm late. Soon's I get a drink I'll be with you!"

Tinker waited—aware of the reckless chance he took, but undisturbed by thoughts of the consequences. Maybe Yerby would meet him, maybe he'd send his men to shoot him down.

ONCE inside the Flying Aces, Yerby snapped an order to Joe: "Get that mirror Joe and get on the roof of the Globe Mercantile. That's about half way down toward Smith on the north side of the street. Don't let him see you. You, Crummy," he pulled the oldster aside, "You and a couple of others get across the street and do something interesting enough to keep Smith's attention away from Joe. Ned, you give me the sign when Joe's ready." Joe was on his way before Yerby finished. Crummy and two other hardcases sauntered across the street to the unfinished hotel. They fooled with the front door. Ned stood by, looking unconcerned but keeping the corner of his vision on the roof of the Globe.

All this mysterious by-play was wasted on Tinker. The seasoned fighter stood his ground and watched for Yerby's appearance. When the man called Ned kicked up a little dust Tinker did not notice or care.

Yerby paced confidently through the batwings of his saloon. He was in his shirtsleeves, his shoulder gun slung a little forward and loose. His wide, black Stetson sat square on his head, the front brim turned down against the blaze of the sun.

For a brief instant the two men paused. Once again Juanito's Main Street was as quiet as a church. Even the perpetual dust was motionless. The morning sun struggled up from its bed among the buttes in the east, straining to shorten the shadows and promise of another hot day, blissfully ignorant of its part in the coming drama.

The tall, heavy man and the tall, lean man started closing the distance between them—Smith with relaxed, unhurried

steps; Yerby with the slightest trace of over-confidence. The cushioned fall of their boots added to the oppressive silence.

Interminable seconds later they were at extreme pistol range. Neither man moved for his gun. A few more steps before the showdown.

Joe peered cautiously over the false front extension of the Globe Mercantile. He brought the heavy washstand mirror up.

Tinker, intent on his enemy in these final moments, was only slightly aware of the flash of light that searched out his eyes. The sun on some window, he thought. Briefly diverting his attention, he saw the outline of Yerby's confederate as he stood on the roof training the mirror on its target. The glare that followed blinded him completely.

Yerby aimed and fired; and at the same instant Tinker instinctively jumped to the right. Yerby's first bullet tore through the soft flesh of Tinker's side painfully, jaringly. Tinker drew and squinted through the cruel brightness that followed him to find his enemy. He threw a shot hopefully, moving rapidly to the right to offer a poorer target and get away from the merciless glare. Lead found him again, flinging his hat off and creasing the scalp under his matted hair. He ignored Yerby's gun and fired directly into the light. He found his mark. A crash of shattered glass and a low moan removed the blinding hazard. Yerby's third shot nicked the gun-smith's ear.

Tinker, his eyes clouded with tears and black sun-spots, plunged desperately toward the alley between the Globe and the post-office. He raced for the back of the buildings.

Yerby cursed his bad marksmanship and turned to order his men to surround the buildings. Then he ran to get another shot.

Tinker, for his part, made good use of his brief freedom. Reaching the back of the Globe, he spotted a large maple that grew near the rear wall of the store. The upper branches would easily lower him to the second story roof. Biting back his pain, the wounded man skinned up the tree like a cat. He swung to the roof soundlessly and lay quiet. None too soon. He could hear Yerby's men scrambling through the alleys and back lots, cursing and shouting; and Yerby himself ordering them to look through the store and the post office. The sound of spike heels running through the store below him was loud. Sooner or later someone would think of the roof.

Tinker inspected his roof hideaway. It was a flat roof with a shallow coping running down the long sides. A false front of thin frame construction rose some five feet over the roofline of the store facing the street. But what was that bundle at the bottom of the false front at the angle of the roof? Tinker moved closer to investigate.

The bleeding form of a dark, heavy man lay in a heap against the framework. In each of his hands was clutched a jagged shard of mirror. This then was the cause of the glare. Tinker could see where his hasty shot had caught the man full in the chest, shattering the mirror and driving fragments of it into his skin. *What was that about a heliograph that he and Tate had been talking about?* Here was the essential part of a heliograph right in front of him! He wrenched the biggest piece of mirror from the man's stiff hand. He had an idea he could use it in his desperate straights.

How long before Yerby's men would investigate the roofs, Tinker could not tell. Not long surely. Yerby must be wild to get rid of him now; he had been Yerby's jinx ever since his arrival in Juanito. Tinker could hear the feet of the men on the second floor just under him. Soon, maybe, one of them would climb the ladder and stick his head through the trap door on the roof to have a look around.

Tinker remembered hearing Yerby say that Tate had led his posse straight for the hills by the mines. That would be a couple of miles west of town and a little south. Tinker looked that way and inspected the terrain for any sign of the riders. He could see none, but his time was short and he would have to take a chance. Carefully, he propped his piece of mirror so that the light of the sun would deflect in that direction. Using his hat as a makeshift shutter he crudely sent the simple three letter distress signal. Luckily he remembered that much of the code after ten years.

Tinker kept his eyes trained south and west. Once, he thought he could see a puff of dust and quickly he adjusted the

mirror to bear more directly toward it. Perhaps the gang with Tate were returning. He frantically flashed his signal.

There was an exclamation from the street and a shot. A rifle bullet whined by Tinker's ear, the ear already bleeding from Yerby's third shot. Two more shots followed quickly, one of them shattered his crude heliograph. Tinker knelt and hastily pushed fresh cartridges in the empty chambers of his light gun. The wound in his side stabbed with sharp pain but he clamped his teeth against the torture.

The thin boards of the false front were a poor shield but they were Tinker's only barricade. He moved along the framework, rising only enough to get a fast view of the men in the street. There were four of them almost right across from the Globe. Tinker dropped two of them and drove the others to cover. A sound behind him caused him to wheel toward the trap door. It lifted to expose a head and a gun. Tinker fired. The trap slammed shut and there was the heavy sound of a body falling down the ladder below, followed closely by loud swearing. Two men had been on the ladder.

Tinker looked toward the low hill where he had discerned the puff of dust. The puff was a cloud now and a long string of fast riding men were clearly seen. Something glinted in the sun. Staring hard, Tinker made it out. It was Tate's saber. He was waving it to acknowledge Tinker's signal.

The besieged gun-smith sized up his own position. He could hear Yerby's voice in the street below, commanding his men to surround the Globe and "Get that damned Smith!" Soon there were men on all the roofs around him. Tinker huddled behind the dead Joe and carefully placed shots at any man who showed himself. Yerby's bunch had learned to respect the gun-smith's pea-shooter and did not expose themselves too much. Their fire was not accurate but it kept Tinker flat on the roof. One shot ripped his shirt from shoulder to belt. He knew he wouldn't last long under this.

Yerby must have had a lookout posted. Over the shooting, Tinker heard a voice: "They're comin' back!"

Then Yerby's big voice: "Get off those roofs and get set like I told you." Suddenly Tinker was no longer a target as the men scurried for the Flying Aces and the new hotel building. He thumbed a few shots but missed.

A glance showed him that Tate was still a half-mile off, but riding hell-bent for the west end of Main Street. They would be no match for the men forted up in the buildings. Tinker had no time to get out and warn them. They would plunge headlong into the trap.

The limp figure of Joe still had one fair sized piece of mirror in its hand. Tinker grabbed this and raked his memory for the code. It came to him. He propped the mirror and rapidly spelled "F-L-A-N-K" toward the advancing troop, over and over again.

Tate's saber flashed again as the riders, barely a hundred yards beyond the saloon, split their ranks and worked in wide semi-circles around the buildings. The first volley of shots from Yerby's forts downed two horses and one man. The rest were warned and took cover. In a matter of minutes what had been meant for an ambush turned into a siege.

Caked with the blood from his wounds, Tinker descended the ladder and stairs of

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the Globe and sought out his old sergeant. He found the old man, pale and exhausted with fatigue but still astride his horse, waving his saber and placing the men in the best places to make their fire effective through the windows and doors of the outlaw's forts.

The old campaigner greeted Tinker gruffly: "One-man army, huh? Since when do you spell 'flank' with a 'd'?" There was no suppressing the spirit of this old man. Tinker was tempted to laugh but the sight of Tate's blood-soaked leg stopped him.

"Get off that bronc, Sarge, and rest awhile. You've got 'em surrounded with a tight loop. They ain't goin' anywheres."

The hotel-owner slid painfully from his saddle and had to hold onto a tree to keep from collapsing. He waved his hand at the scene of battle and spoke his last command: "You take over, Corporal."

Tinker shook his friend's hand. "Thanks for savin' my hide." He heard running feet behind him. Bess and Lawyer Jenkins came up, loaded with bandages. Bess forced her father to sit down on the grass and as she tended to his leg she turned her face up to Tinker. "You were right Tinker. Bland just rode across the river to get us and told us the whole story." She saw his bloody clothes. "You've been shot! Stay here and I'll do something for you."

Tinker smiled his thanks but wheeled to walk away. Over his shoulder he announced, "I've got an appointment first."

He passed the word around for the men to cease firing. Presently, only intermittent volleys from the saloon and hotel building broke the quiet. This too stopped.

Tinker took a position in the middle of the street, just out of range of Yerby's gunmen. He called: "Yerby! Are you fixin' to forget our target practice?" A dead silence followed. Several minutes passed. The batwings of the Flying Aces folded back.

Yerby stepped into the street, arrogant but not so confident as before. His gun was drawn and he walked without hesitation toward his wiry enemy. The two men fired together, the smack of Tinker's light gun drowned in the roar of Yerby's .45. With deliberate ease, Tinker thumbed two more shots at Juanito's former boss.

The giant man, feet planted firmly, seemed to refuse the small bullets. A look of disbelief came over his face. He could not command his gun. His fingers opened and the heavy hog-leg dropped to the dirt. But the man still stood rigid and defiant.

Then the muscles of Yerby's face slackened. His huge body rocked gently at first, like a great pine sawed through at the base. The last will to live left him. He toppled, straight and heavy, into the unresisting dust.

The puff of his fall was a signal for the ranchers and citizens surrounding the outlaws. With a wild yell they plunged into the two buildings. The leaderless gang offered no resistance. They gave up meekly.

The justice of Juanito was quick and sure that morning.

* * *

In the Tate Hotel lobby there was a large crowd. The people who had fled the town were back ready to acclaim their heroes. Tinker and Russ Tate sat in the most comfortable chairs, bandaged, tired and content. Old Tom Jaynes stopped polishing the badge he held in his hand and made a speech:

"By vote of the qualified citizens of Juanito and the surrounding country, this shiny, six-point target is your burden from now henceforth." He pinned the sheriff's badge on Smith's shirt and continued: "We hate to see our new sheriff start his career by wasting three shots on such a worthless critter as that corpse out there,"—waggling his thumb in the direction of the street—"But we have decided to overlook that and give you a complete set of gun-smithing tools and a wagon-load of ammunition to improve your shootin'!"

Tinker was weak from loss of blood and sleep but managed to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd. He held up his hand for silence. "Where's Cochran? You folks ought to thank him and Russ Tate here for bringing you to your senses."

Tate waved his hand and shook his head, "Never mind the thanks and don't bother that Cochran boy. I been tryin' to get a son-in-law to support me for the last three years. He and that schemin' daughter of mine are somewheres, plannin' a daily paper and details of a weddin'!"

THE END

Coke Deals With the Devil

That high-handed, high-priced drummer, Joseph Cokesbury Weathers signed a contract that would make him King-For-A-Day —if his partner died first, or a Corpse-For-Keeps if his partner used the derringer that was punched into Coke's brisket!

By SPENCER FROST

Coke threw himself to the floor as he cleared his gun.

MR. JOSEPH COKESBURY WEATHERS drew rein on his team of fast-trotting little mules and from the seat of his bright yellow huckster wagon stared at the woebegone-looking young man limping down the trail from the direction of Assay Point. Mr. Weathers, or Coke as he was usually called, was not easily astounded. Long ago he had learned that life in Arizona followed no set pattern. A man on foot, while unusual in this remote and sizzling section, was not un-

heard-of. But the sight of a man who limped and yet managed to limp so aggressively as to convey the impression that he would gladly fight his weight in wildcats, that was a sight to nonpluss even the imperturbable Coke.

The young pedestrian wore badly soiled tailor-made trousers, the tattered remnants of an expensive white shirt, abundant, disordered black hair, and a big purple bulge where his left eye should be.

"Howdy?" Coke greeted.

The young man focused on Coke the penetrating beam of his one good eye.

"As you may surmise, not so good," he replied.

"You're headed into twenty miles of sand and cactus," said Coke. "How about giving you a lift back to Assay Point?"

"Assay Point? No thanks. I just got run out of that town."

"Run out?"

"Run out. An experience similar to being ridden on the well-known rail."

"Har-umph! You displeased some of the citizens?"

"Evidently. I started a weekly newspaper, the *Assay Pointer*. Every Thursday. Got out two issues. This morning a trio of hard-fisted gents came into my office, laid down three hundred dollars and a hand-written bill of sale and made me sign it."

"Made you, you say?"

"Well, I argued the case. But that lick that closed my eye also floored me, and while two of 'em sat on me, the other one began breaking up the equipment. I decided to take the three hundred rather than to have nothing except a wreck."

"Har-umph! Perplexing. Assay Point always impressed me as being a settlement of orderly, hard-working miners."

"A man named Steve Allen is running the town now. He recently bought the Maud Miller gold mine and the Thirsty King saloon, got in with the political gang and set himself up as town boss. I'm sure he's back of the trouble."

"Steve Allen," repeated Coke thoughtfully. "Steve Allen. Name sounds familiar, but I don't place the man. Ran you out. That's bad."

"Bad? It's an outrage!"

"Son, you'd better put up with me for the night. We'll camp at that water hole a mile ahead."

By the time Coke and his guest had finished supper, Coke had learned that the young man was Danny Long who had very positive ideas about newspaper work and an ambition to marry a girl back in Little Rock as soon as he could get a paper started on a paying basis. Danny had had one encounter with Steve Allen over the editorial policy of the paper which displeased Allen. And since Allen had appointed Ed Higgins as town marshal and Higgins was strictly an Allen stooge, Danny neither expected nor received help from the law.

As Danny talked, Coke kept making disapproving noises and repeating the name Steve Allen. Danny in turn, soothed by the good meal, expressed admiration for Coke's skill as a camp-maker, and he chuckled as he read the legend printed in bold black letters on the side of Coke's covered wagon:

J. COKESBURY WEATHERS. FANCY AND STAPLE MERCHANDISE. RAZORS HONED. LETTERS WRITTEN. TEETH PULLED. DRUGS AND REMEDIES. WEATHERS' FAMOUS BITTERS.

"You certainly carry a stock of trades and merchandise," he remarked.

"Son," said Coke, "my business is to inveigle dollars into Coke Weathers' pockets. Some day I hope to retire on a ten-acre patch by the side of a lake, raise strawberries and watermelons and read Buckle's History of the World."

"And I," said Danny grimly, "wanted to publish a paper and raise a family in the town of Assay Point."

"No man or group of men," said Coke, "has a right to say you can't publish your paper in the town of your choice. When I reach Assay Point tomorrow, I'm going to find out why they ran you out."

"If," said Danny, "this sprained knee would limber up a bit and I can get a glimmer of light through this eclipsed eye, I'd like to go along and try another crack at those hoodlums who ganged me."

"There's nothing like a liberal application of Weathers' Wonder-Working Liniment," said Coke. "It'll remedy anything but a broken promise."

Assay Point sprawled crazy-quilt fashion around the base of Tahlequah Mountain, the home of the rich Maud Miller gold mine. As Coke's wagon rattled up the dusty

main street, a man stepped from in front of the Thirsty King saloon and motioned for him to stop. He was a stranger to Coke. A lawman's badge gleamed on the front of his cowhide vest and he strutted importantly as he hitched up his low-hanging holster.

"That's Ed Higgins, town marshal," said Danny who thanks to Coke's medication now had fairly good vision out of his damaged eye. "He's a Steve Allen posey."

Higgins looked over Coke's outfit with an open sneer.

"No peddlers ain't allowed in this town," he announced.

Coke turned a withering eye upon the man.

"That statement may have its points, but I, sir, am no peddler. I am, as you may see by reading the announcement on the side of my wagon, a reputable merchant and a qualified practitioner of diversified professions."

"Huh?" snarled Higgins. "Don't go to pullin' no big words on me or I'll arrest you fer resistin' a officer."

"Faw! No big words are necessary, sir. A three-letter word beginning with "a" and ending with "double-s" seems to cover your case completely."

Higgins' eyes blinked stupidly and his face flushed with anger.

"Git out of town," he shouted, snatching out his gun and waving it wildly. "Git movin' or I'll shoot that yaller wagon full of holes."

Higgins' loud threat attracted attention. Up and down the street pedestrians stopped to look. Some few crowded around curiously. Coke glared down at the raving Higgins.

"Oh tish, tish, officer. A brave officer of the law never pulls a gun on a citizen unless he is threatened. And you are a brave officer, are you not, Mr. Higgins?"

Higgins gulped, staring at Coke in stupefaction. Nearby a cowboy let loose with a loud haw-haw. It was contagious. The crowd roared and whooped. Higgins shouted and pranced and waved his arms for silence. He would as well have rebuked the wind. The crowd grew. People were attracted from the stores by the sound of merriment. Several swarmed out of the Thirsty King saloon, amongst them a puffy little man with a pasty face and important air, flashily dressed in coat and fancy vest and cravat adorned with a big diamond pin. His arrival created a ripple in the crowd that attracted Coke's attention. For a moment the eyes of the two men met. The man jerked to a sudden stop, his eyes wide with alarm. Then he turned and hurried back into the saloon. The merriment subsided almost as quickly as it had started, and Ed Higgins, choking with rage and humiliation, poked at Coke with the muzzle of his gun.

"Git goin'," he shouted. "Git your peddler junk outa town."

Coke straightened in his seat, gave Higgins one more withering glare, then slapped his mules into motion. Danny Long was almost bursting with suspense.

"Did you see him—the pasty-faced dude with the diamond? That was Steve Allen. He seemed startled when he saw you."

"He was," Coke returned grimly, "because he is not Steve Allen. But seeing him caused me to recall who Steve Allen is."

"Then who is this dude that ran me out of Assay Point?"

"HIS NAME is Bert Spillers. I got acquainted with him and Steve Allen several months ago when I was working the north end of the state. Steve Allen was there for his health, and the doctors gave him a year to live. He had a lot of money and no relatives to leave it to, but he had an idea. He was going to buy a mine and give it to the town where his miners lived. And out of the earnings was to be built a sanitarium for other sufferers. Allen was a big man. Mebbe that's the reason I had difficulty identifying the name with a petty town boss. Bert Spillers was Allen's secretary and business manager."

"Then what became of Steve Allen and his mine?"

"The Maud Miller gold mine no doubt is the mine; but as to the whereabouts of Steve Allen, I suspect Spillers wouldn't like to answer that question."

"My goodness, what a story for my—for a paper!" Danny exclaimed. "Impostor steals name and fortune of philantrophist."

"Bert Spillers was afraid that story might be published, that's the reason he wants no newspaper in Assay Point."

"But I knew nothing of the facts."

"A newspaper would carry news items

about Steve Allen, the mine owner, and Spillers wants no such items catching the eye of some of Allen's past acquaintances. As it is, Allen has dropped from sight, and Spillers wants him to remain so."

"But why did he run you out of town, too?"

"Several months ago, Steve Allen discussed his plan with one Coke Weathers, a perambulating merchant who might some time come to Assay Point and discover the deception. As a precaution Spillers instructs his strong-arm gang to keep peddlers out of town."

Danny's eyes grew wide with excitement.

"You've hit it," he exclaimed. "But do you realize what that means? You have recognized Spillers and he knows it. Now for self-protection he'll have to kill you."

"That realization no doubt is distressing Mr. Spillers."

"We better keep going."

"I never seek trouble," said Coke; "but neither do I run from it. Spillers has overlooked an important point—that this is a land of free enterprise. It is the mandate of the people that the news shall go to press and that the peddler shall cry his wares with none to make them afraid. It is true in Bangor and it is true in San Diego. It must be true in Assay Point. I am going to call on Mr. Spillers."

"But you can't fight Spiller's gang?"

"Fighting is a crude way of settling disputes. I shall try more subtle methods."

Coke invaded the box behind his wagon seat and pulled out a heavy .45 army pistol in a shoulder holster which he buckled under his coat.

"But if fight we must," he explained, "then trust Coke Weathers to hold up his end of it."

Danny pulled his hat down tight.

"It looks like fighting for a lost cause," he said grimly, "but I'll enjoy taking a crack at those bullies even if the odds are against us."

"Hold on, you're not going," Coke objected. "This is merely a reconnoitering expedition. Action may come later, perhaps; but not now."

Business in the Thirsty King was brisk. Coke beckoned to the nearest bartender who was fat and bald and perspiring.

"I want to see Steve Allen—on business."

"I'll see what he says," the bartender replied.

He squeezed through the opening between the bar and the wall and tapped on a door at the end of the room. A voice called, "Come in," and Coke promptly shoved the bartender aside, pushed open the door, strode into the room and closed the door behind him. Spillers, seated at a heavy oak desk at the farther side of a comfortably furnished office, bounced to his feet in consternation.

"Yes, you are right, Mr. Spillers. I am Coke Weathers. You took too much precaution. If your bouncer hadn't ordered me out of town, I might never have seen you."

Spillers licked his lips and gestured with a nervous hand.

"You can't come bursting into a man's office like this,"

"Don't be alarmed; I didn't expose you. I realize that even your help don't know you're a phoney. I've got to hand it to you, Spillers, you're no piker. You steal a man's name and position as well as his property."

"I bought out Mr. Allen," Spillers declared, desperately trying to appear calm. "It was merely convenient to let the property stand in his name."

"It would be. What happened to Allen and his philanthrophic scheme? The doctors gave him a year."

"The doctors were wrong. He died six months ago."

"But before he died you had already come to Assay point and bought the property."

"Certainly. As Mr. Allen's manager I handled all such details."

"And anticipating Mr. Allen's death you introduced yourself in Assay Point as Steve Allen. You planned to kill Allen, and after the property was safely in his name, you did kill him, and then you came here and took over."

Spiller's eyes were wide with terror.

"You—you're a fool," he spluttered.

"You're the fool, Spillers. In this country no man is big enough to muzzle the press and suppress free trade. The Assay Pointer must proclaim its news and in the streets of the town the huckster's bell must bring the housewives rushing out to barter and to buy. 'Tis the custom of a great nation."

Spillers, his face sick with fear, leaned

back in his chair in a poor attempt at defiance, pulled a cigar from his vest pocket and nervously applied a match to it. As he flipped the burnt match into the waste basket, his hand reached for the little steel ring which hung suspended by a cord from the ceiling.

"Don't do that."

Coke's voice was pitched low, but severe with warning, and the muzzle of his pistol suddenly yawned upon Spiller's vest.

"You're not smart, Spillers. Pulling that cord will only bring your help in on this. And you don't want even them to know who you are."

Spillers settled back, rigidly, into his chair.

"What's—your proposition?" he asked weakly.

"A partnership."

"You can't get away with it. I'll have your hide hung out to dry—"

"Sir, you are on the wrong end of the gun to boast."

Pen and ink were on the desk. Coke reached over the desk, pulled open a drawer and drew out a pad of writing paper.

"Write, Spillers," he ordered.

COKE dictated thoughtfully. Spillers wrote with a surly viciousness. When he had finished Coke picked up the sheet and read upon it the terms of the contract whereby Steve Allen delivered to Joseph Cokesbury Weathers half interest in the Maud Miller gold mine, the Thirsty King saloon, and all monies in the possession of Steve Allen. And a final and interesting provision was the stipulation that in the event of the death of either party, all the property reverted to the other.

"Now," said Coke, "you may tinkle the bell. Send for Barber John and Sim Booton, the postmaster, to witness our signatures on this."

Those well-known citizens were obviously perplexed by the summons to Allen's office.

"Gentlemen," Coke explained, "Mr. Allen and I have just formed a partnership whereby I become half owner of the Maud Miller mine, the Thirsty King, et cetera. We wish you gentlemen to witness our signatures to the contract. Mr. Allen as senior member should sign first."

The document completed, Coke thanked the two men and bowed them out the door. Then he folded and pocketed the contract.

"I'll keep this in a safe place, Spillers."

"Stop calling me Spillers. I'm Steve Allen around here."

"Tomorrow, Mr. Allen, we can go into the matter of management. I always like to see a business pay a profit."

Danny Long's eyes popped out as he read the contract.

"W-what's the meaning of this?" he gasped.

"It means that I now half-way realize a worthy but elusive ambition to own a gold mine."

"But how could you buy a thing like that?"

"A little adroit blackmailing is a powerful weapon, my young friend. Not commendable, perhaps, but at times convenient. Spillers murdered Steve Allen and he knows that I know it. The contract is the price of my silence."

A sickly pallor crept over Danny's face.

"You—become partner with a murderer?" he exclaimed.

"Gold mines come high," said Coke. "And opportunity is a fickle wench to be seized when within reach."

"But that clause providing that the property goes to the survivor—it's an open invitation to murder!"

"I've never had any ambition to be half-owner of a gold mine. And men who live recklessly like Spillers don't live long."

Coke again invaded the wagon and soon emerged clad in clean duck trousers, long black coat and black string tie. He dusted his old Stetson by slapping it vigorously across his legs, and then announced that he was going back to town. A few minutes later he was upon a street serving the residence part of Assay Point, his stalwart figure straining the back of his long-tail coat, his long arms swinging with the rhythm of his stride. Coke was calling on his trade. Left behind was his brilliant yellow wagon with its silver-toned little bell which summoned the housewives to barter and to buy—and buy at a princely price, usually, for an acknowledged pirate of high prices was Coke. But his was a piracy attended by so gallant a bow and so

ready a tongue that his fair customers felt themselves favored by the privilege of buying his merchandise at twice its actual value. Always his coming was eagerly greeted, his going accompanied by sincere invitations to call again. And today Coke was accepting the invitation.

"Mrs. Johnson," he explained to the first lady who answered his imperative knock, "I am here to apologize for not bringing you those excellent bargains which your wonderful sense of values has always demanded; but I cannot bring them, Mrs. Johnson, because I am forbidden the pleasure of trading with you."

"What do you mean forbidden?" Mrs. Johnson asked.

"The man who runs the town, one Steve Allen, I believe, has ordered me to keep my wagon out of town."

"You mean to tell me that Steve Allen says I can't buy what I want when I want it?"

"You express it so nicely, Mrs. Johnson. That is exactly what I mean."

"Why the idea? Who ever heard of such a thing? I'm going right down town and give Steve Allen a piece of my mind."

Then Coke assumed the role of counsellor and convinced Mrs. Johnson that the crisis demanded action, and for that purpose a meeting was being held at Coke's wagon camp tonight. Would Mrs. Johnson ask her husband to attend?

Coke made several more calls with the result that shortly after nightfall a dozen perplexed and curious husbands of irate wives gathered at his camp. Coke explained how Danny's paper had been suppressed and how he, Coke, had been run out of town, and that he believed an attempt would be made to kill him tonight.

The citizens were aroused. They were eager to follow Coke's suggestion that they hide nearby and watch developments.

Most of the men had guns. From his stock Coke supplied the unarmed ones with a miscellaneous assortment of firearms, and thus prepared they concealed themselves in the bushes bordering the camp.

Coke lit his lantern, seated himself upon a camp stool, leaned back against a wagon wheel and buried his nose in a dog-eared copy of Burns.

"Why set yourself up like a target in a shooting gallery?" Danny asked.

"The alias Allen is the most complete physical coward I have ever seen," said Coke. "And he'll be too cautious to risk shooting his victim this close to town. I am curious to see how he goes about it."

His curiosity was soon gratified. Three riders, one of whom lead a saddled horse, pulled to a halt, and one of them called a greeting.

"How about fixin' us up with a few sacks of Durham?" he asked. "We plumb fergot to stock up in town."

"Certainly," Coke replied, laying down his book.

As he rose to his feet the spokesman swung down from the saddle and jabbed a gun into Coke's stomach.

"Never mind the Durham, peddler. Jest walk over to that horse with the empty saddle and crawl aboard."

"What's this?" Coke cried, shooting his hands high. "Why cover me with a gun right in my own camp?"

"Shut up and do what you're told," the man snapped.

"Mister, I don't take orders like that when I've got the upper hand," Coke retorted. "You fellows will be distressed to learn that you are covered by a dozen guns. You see, gents, you were expected."

One rider snorted an oath. Both wheeled their horses to peer into the darkness. The man with the gun snarled.

"We don't bluff, peddler. Git movin'."

"Very well," Coke agreed stepping slowly toward the riderless horse, but raising his voice he called, "Keep 'em covered boys. He's got a gun on me."

"We see it," came the foghorn voice of Alex Johnson, from the darkness. "And I've got that gun-toter in my sights."

"And we've got the other'ns lined up," came a voice from the other side. "Keep crouched low, boys, so's we won't hit each other if we cut down on 'em."

For a moment the invaders appeared paralyzed. Then hell broke loose. The gunman wheeled about, his gun barrel crashed the lantern plunging the camp into darkness, and the two riders spurred their mounts. Then the roar of guns drowned the clatter of hooves. The man on the ground dived for his horse, but Coke's heavy fist landed on his jaw and he went limp.

The firing ceased. Men came running.

Some one applied a match to the globeless lantern which sent out a flickering glare. One man sprawled on the ground, groaning. Coke's victim sat shaking his head in a daze.

"One of 'em got away," Johnson groaned.

"Do you boys know these buzzards?" Coke asked.

"They're the villians that beat me up in the print shop yesterday," Danny Long declared.

"The one that flourished the gun is Cleet Bass," said Johnson. "This other'n is Leo Skruggs. The one that got away is Jim Weiss. They all work for Steve Allen."

"All's right with the world," said Coke. "Some of you boys turn Bass over to the sheriff and send a doctor out to see about Skruggs. I've got business in town."

Steve Allen was in the Thirsty King sauntering around amongst the games and failed to see Coke until Coke at his elbow said, "I'll see you in your office, pardner."

Spillers' face turned pale, indicating he had never expected to see Coke again. With a none-too-successful attempt at nonchalance he lead the way to his office.

"Your killers made a flop of it, Spillers," Coke announced when the door was closed behind them. "Two of 'em are being turned over to the sheriff in more or less bad order. Jim Weiss escaped."

"I dón't know what you're talking about," said Spillers.

"Spillers, I can't do business with a man who is so low as to try to bump off his partner of less than eight hours. I must insist on full ownership of the property. You may sign it over to me in the space at the bottom of the contract."

He spread the contract on the desk. But Spillers had no chance to reply. The door burst open and in rushed an excited and breathless Jim Weiss, the scratch of a bullet on his cheek indicating the narrowness of his escape from Coke's camp.

"Boss, there's hell to pay!" he gasped, then recognizing Coke his hand flashed to his gun.

Coke threw himself to the floor and his army pistol cleared his under-arm holster. The room exploded with gun fire. Weiss had fired, but too high, and Coke's first bullet staggered Weiss back against the wall. Spillers had disappeared from sight, but Coke saw his arm protruding over the top of his desk firing a gun at random in hope of hitting an enemy he was afraid to stand and face.

Weiss, leaned against the wall, was slowly sinking toward the floor. Spillers' gun snapped empty, and like a cat Coke leaped from a crouch, cleared the desk and fell upon the cringing Spillers who was frantically trying to reload. Coke seized his arm, pulled it over his shoulder, and with a powerful movement flung the astonished man across the desk into the floor beyond. Dazed by the fall, Spillers struggled to his hands and knees. Weiss' gun barked once more as the sinking man fired blindly. With a gasp Spillers sank back to the floor. At last one of Weiss' bullets had found a human target.

As the firing ceased, men crowded through the door. Amongst them was Higgins, the marshal, badly bewildered.

"The arm of the law is now getting its strength from the people, not from Allen," Coke warned him. "Weiss here killed Spillers, or Allen as you knew him. Better get the doctor for Weiss."

Danny Long was in the crowd. He

Edward Mann*

has switched to Calvert because

Calvert makes a lighter highball

*of 1522 Kelton Ave., W. Los Angeles, Calif.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey – 86.8 Proof – 65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

walked back to camp with Coke.

"You went there to kill Spillers?" he asked bitterly.

"I went there to get full title to the mine. I always wondered what it would seem like to be rich."

"But the mine belongs to the people of this town. That was Mr. Allen's intention."

"There is no such stipulation in my contract."

"You mean you are going to keep the property?"

"Perhaps I should share with you, Danny. How about taking back the Assay Pointer?"

"With pleasure. But the first issue will carry the full story of Steve Allen's philanthropic scheme."

"You mean — har — umph — that you would tell how I came into the property—even after I give you your paper back?"

"That's the function of a newspaper—to tell the truth to the people."

"Faw, faw, and fiddlesticks. You wouldn't HAVE to print that story. You're a mule-headed young pup. Go to bed. I've got a business program to think over."

When Danny awoke, Coke was preparing breakfast while he mixed quotations from Burns with snatches of an unmusical doggerel. Danny was disillusioned and very uncommunicative. After breakfast they hitched up the mules and drove up the main street of Assay Point. In front of the closed newspaper office Coke pulled to a halt. From his inside coat pocket he pulled several folded sheets of paper filled with his bold handwriting, obviously the work of last night.

"This is an announcement for you to publish in the first issue of the Assay Pointer," he said.

Wonderingly Danny took the papers.

"Why it's a notice to the people of Assay Point that they own the Maud Miller mine!" he exclaimed.

"Conveyed to them by an unusual title, and one probably open to legal questioning; but it'll stand up in a court of law."

"But last night you said—"

"Last night you jumped at your own unjustified conclusions."

"You said you had an ambition to own a gold mine."

A smile struggled at the corners of Coke's mouth.

"It was a great feeling—owning it over night."

A happy grin brightened Danny's face. His strong young hand folded over Coke's brawny one.

"We understand each other, Coke," he said.

"We do," said Coke solemnly. "And now we must keep the good housewives waiting no longer. My bargains are unusually attractive this trip. And—don't publish this in the paper—the profits are not to be sneezed at, either."

Then slapping his mules into motion, the millionaire-for-a-night drove up the dusty main street, tinkling his little silver-toned huckster bell to proclaim his coming to the waiting wives of Assay Point.

The Long and the Short of It

IN EVERY saloon and store in old Sacramento hung Chris Yager's "business card." Crudely hand-printed, it stated: "C. Yager gives complete burial job. I make coffins, dig graves, etc. Good at making fancy headboards, cheep."

Although Chris took great pride in his work in general, it was in making up the "epitaffies"—as he called them—that he put his heart and soul. If Chris had liked the late lamented gent, he would print a glowing epitaph on the headboard. But if the deceased had been an unpopular trouble-maker he got short-changed by Yager's crude lettering talents. So it was because of Chris' personal opinion of a pair of boothill tenants that gave the Sacramento cemetery both the shortest and the longest epitaphs in the old west.

The shortest simply said, "Ed burns."

Chris realized it should have been a capital "B" instead of a small one—but not until he had finished his lettering job. As he had disliked Burns, he just let it ride. Chris always claimed it was the most truthful epitaph that ever was created.

The sudden death of a popular individual—a youth who had been especially admired by Yager—caused Chris to outdo himself. In order to fit in all he had to say, in this longest of "epitaffies," he nailed three ordinary-sized headboards together. Then, in black letters he printed:

"Here lies the body of Wills Hamrick, who was accidently shot on the bank of the Sacramento River, by a young man. He was accidently shot with one of the large Colt's revolvers with no stopper for the cock to rest on. It was one of the old fashioned kind—brass mounted. And such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

—JOHN T. LYNCH

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

HARRY BRAND

1

The idea that it takes a horse, a gun, two fists and a six-foot frame to be a Western hero was never so completely disproved as in the case of Harry Brand, who was anything but, yet heroically saved the lives of two dozen snowbound settlers during the winter of 1856.

2

Harry was well past middle age when he got a chance to show the stuff he was made of—a fading and never very funny comedian whose oft-repeated routine was booed off the stage by a critical Chicago audience. With shouts and cat-calls, they told him to "get out of town". Harry took their advice, boarded a passing wagon train that was making a last-chance dash across the Rockies before the trails closed for the season.

3

Winter, however, overtook the small band of travelers and in the mountains heavy snows swamped them, froze their animals. They struggled on afoot, managed to reach a cabin and repair it before they were completely snowed in. Without food, they soon began to talk about cannibalism. That is, until Harry took the stage.

4

On Nov. 2, 1856, began the longest and what must certainly have been the funniest, show on record, for the comedian's companions actually forgot that they were starving—they were too busy laughing! For 10 days, every time tempers snapped, and, twice, when ugly whispers of man-eating-man, began, Harry went into his act. In that time, before a relief party arrived, he told 1,207 different jokes, sang for a total of 57 hours, danced nearly 600 miles around the tiny cabin —and saved the lives and sanity of 23 people. But his greatness never returned. He died three years later, in a San Francisco home for destitute stage folk.

The Gun-Pack

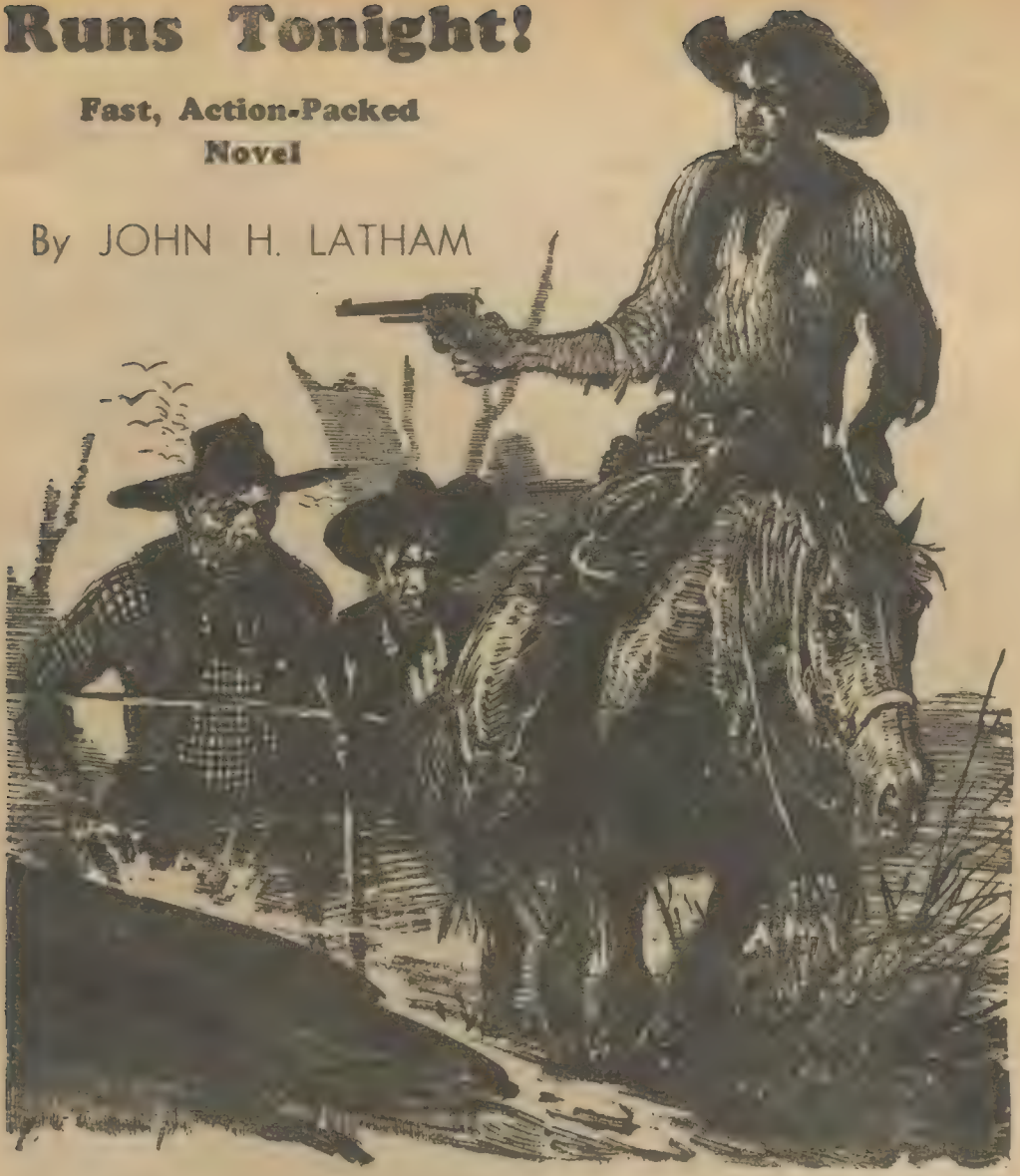
Jess kept his gun on them as he rode up.

The lone-wolf game Big Jess Farrow played when he threw in with those renegade bandidos, was a long-loop gamble with death for the rich Lonesome Valley. . . . But Death's best joke is to twist a long-loop toss into a tight-noose knot around the player's neck!

Runs Tonight!

Fast, Action-Packed Novel

By JOHN H. LATHAM



CHAPTER ONE

Tecolote Death Rattle

AN OUTLAW moon rode the bald hills above the Rio Grande.

The man who called himself Big Jess Farrow, hunkered over a small brush fire in an arroyo near the river, felt the call of that moon as strongly as a wolf feels the mating call. There was something of the wolf in the long-built, rawboned man who crouched back in the shadows from the fire and smoked a cornhusk quirly that smelled of black Mexican tobacco.

A red stubble of beard covered the lower part of his face. Under the low-pulled brim of his sweat-stained hat his eyes reflected the faint light like coals of fire. His nose had been broken in some barroom brawl, and slanted askew over a thin-lipped mouth.

Big Jess Farrow wore the thorn-scarred chaps and leather brush jacket of a working

cowhand. A heavy six-shooter hung in a scarred holster at his hip. But the almost deathly pallor of his bony face marked him definitely. He was prison-branded. And he was here to keep an appointment with the devil that dated back five years.

But Big Jess wasn't worrying about that. He was keening the night air like a wolf long away from accustomed haunts, savoring the tang of black river mud and the heavy smells of shin-oak and chaparral and flowering huisache that hung in the air.

Maybe he was thinking of other nights when an outlaw moon lighted the way for border-jumpers shoving wet cattle across the river. Or nights when renegades swapped lead with Rurales and Rangers in the Texas and Tamaulipas brush. Big Jess Farrow had heard the whisper of sudden death on more than one night ride. . . .

An owl hooted somewhere near the river. It was the hoot of the *tecolote,* as the Mexicans called it, familiar to every cowhand in the country. Big Jess didn't move, but he shifted his holster so that his fingers would brush the black butt of his gun.

That would be Pelon, the Bald One, who carried two razor-sharp knives somewhere in his fancy *charro* garb and would cut a man's guts out at the drop of a sombrero. There was a yellow streak in Pelon's makeup that made him all the more dangerous. Big Jess had nothing but contempt for his kind, and therefore he was always on guard.

There came the creak of saddle gear and the faint clip-clop of shod hoofs on the river trail, and the Mexican rode into the little clearing in the mouth of the arroyo. He was a squat, swarthy man with thick saddle-muscled legs and a crooked smile that showed yellow teeth between fat, greasy lips. With him was a lean, scarred man who looked no more than twenty.

But the Reno Kid was forty, if he was a day. His sins hadn't marred the youthful lines of his face. Only his pale, slitted eyes showed the hell he'd been through. He sat moodily silent most of the time, like he had something black on his mind that he didn't talk about, and Big Jess could look in his eyes and see that it was rotten. But the Reno Kid had saved his life a few nights before. He felt obligated to the slight, dead-eyed little killer.

The two men swung down and approached the fire, warily as always, and Pelon's heavy-roweled Chihuahua spurs dragged a musical trail in the dust. There was blood on those spurs and his horse had been ridden hard. The bald outlaw was hell on horseflesh.

The Reno Kid said, "You're early, *amigo,*" and stared into the fire. Pelon stood back and watched the shadows uneasily. Big Jess said nothing. The strange silence held as they waited for El Tecolote.

That wasn't his real name, of course. Nobody knew that. But El Tecolote was *jefe* of this night-riding outfit. He had led them on raids all along the back door of Old Mexico. He carried a hunk of Rurale lead near his heart and his heart was black with hate for any man who wore a law badge. He had killed a few lawmen in his day, one of them in cold blood.

Five other men drifted in, all hell-raising renegades from both sides of the border. They made a tough, gun-hung bunch. There were filed pawls and not a few notches among them, and the aggregate bounty on their hides would have made a wad of hundred dollar bills big enough to choke a packmule.

Then an owl hoot sounded up the arroyo, and Big Jess knew that El Tecolote had been casing the camp before riding in. His grin was crooked as he watched the outlaw *jefe* materialize out of the night. The reward on El Tecolote alone would buy a sizable ranch. . . .

EL TECOLOTE was tall, thick-shouldered, and rode a long stirrup. He had a broad, solid face with steely black whiskers and a loose-lipped mouth jerked down at the corners under a stringy black mustache. He was dressed in black, and straddled a black horse. He rode the country like a shadow, and he could see at night like a cat.

When El Tecolote swung his horse near the fire, Big Jess saw that he was leading a prisoner.

"I caught her snooping around below the camp," the *jefe* growled.

It was Wyeth Mooney, daughter of old Mossback Mooney who ran a way-station for outlaws at Niggerhead Crossing. She was wearing a cowpuncher's wash-faded overalls and blue shirt, but the shirt was

torn-and the rough garb didn't hide her shapely young figure. Her dark hair was mussed and her wrists were roped to the saddlehorn. There was shame in her eyes, shame and defiance, and her face looked drained of color in the flickering firelight.

"Somebody," said El Tecolote, rubbing his fingers across four bloody furrows on his cheek, "yank that little spitfire out of the saddle and tie her down. We can't have her spreading an alarm."

Pelon was instantly on his feet, a hungry eagerness in his close-set eyes. But Big Jess Farrow beat the Bald One to the girl's horse without seeming to hurry. And the bleak look he gave Pelon stilled any protest the squat outlaw might have made.

"We're moving in tonight," said El Tecolote, squatting on his long hunkers near the fire. His dead-black eyes flicked about him with the impact of a whip-lash. "I've waited five years for this. I'll kill the man who crosses me up. . . .

"Reno, you take two men and run Juan Hernandez out. Pelon will take a crew to the Y-Up-And-Down. I'll handle old Casoose Uvalde. There shouldn't be any trouble. Just four punchers at the Y-Up-And-Down and a handful of sheepherdin' *pelados* to chase across the river."

Big Jess Farrow lifted the girl from the saddle and carried her, struggling, into the shadows beyond the fire. Her eyes burned up at him, full of hatred and contempt and fear. She was as full of fight as a cornered wildcat. But Big Jess handled her easily, and when he bent and placed his lips near her ear, the fragrance of her hair seemed to warm his blood and excite him.

"Shut up!" he whispered, urgently. "Don't attract any more attention than you have to!"

It was a dangerous moment. Recognition would be fatal, and his skin crawled at the thought of Wyeth inadvertently blurting out something.

But she was quiet after that, watching his broad back with a frozen expression as he moved to the fire. He could hear her ruffled breathing as he faced the outlaw *jefe*. He hooked a thumb toward her.

"What about old Mossback's kid?" he asked. "I thought he was a friend of ours?"

There was suspicion in the slitted eyes of the renegade ramrod as he stared up at Jess Farrow, and it was reflected in the cool attention of the other four men.

At an outlaw hideout a few nights before, one of his crew, with too much *tequila* under his belt and a chip on his shoulder, had crowded Big Jess into a gunfight—and gotten the final surprise of his life when the long-built man beat him to the draw.

Pelon had bought chips in the game then, drawing his gun and leveling it at Farrow's back. Only the Reno Kid's quick action had saved Big Jess. The baby-faced Kid had coolly shot the gun out of the Bald One's fingers, and knocked him in the head with his six-shooter barrel when Pelon tried to throw one of his sneak knives.

The fight hadn't been Jess Farrow's fault. The hideout owner said the big man had showed up at his place a few days before, broke and on the dodge, one jump ahead of the Rangers. So El Tecolote had no scruples about taking him on to fill the dead man's boots. He had something big underway and he couldn't operate short-handed.

But the new recruit hadn't fired a shot for El Tecolote, as yet, and the *jefe* never trusted a man behind his back that he hadn't tried out.

"You can leave the girl here," he answered, finally. "As long as we have her, we won't worry about Mossback getting word out to the Rangers. But snub her to a tree with rawhide so she won't get loose and spoil our play. She'd have every rancher in Lonesome Valley up in arms inside an hour!

"Ride with Pelon," he added, rising. "I can count on him to keep his eyes on you. Play your hand right," he said, "and you'll be wearing diamonds on your headstall. Cross me. . . ." His dead-black eyes finished the threat.

Big Jess shook his head, smiling. "Don't worry about me, boss," he said placatingly. "I don't aim to lock horns with you."

Shortly, the renegades were in the saddle and heading up-river at an easy lope. Pelon was the last one to leave camp with his crew. The Mexican waited impatiently while Big Jess Farrow lashed the girl's feet together with a length of catch-rope cut from her own saddle, and snubbed her hands to a strong blackthorn bush with a strip of rawhide.

Big Jess bent and whispered something

to the girl, then swung quickly to leather. He and Pelon and a *gringo* renegade called Chiricahua Charlie trailed the main bunch for a few miles, then turned off and headed toward the Y-Up-And-Down ranch near the head of Lonesome Valley.

And they were barely out of hearing before Wyeth Mooney worked her bonds loose and was riding hell-bent over the hills toward Niggerhead Crossing.

IT WAS queer, the way a range went bad. It had happened to Lonesome Valley once before, because of Niggerhead Crossing.

The settlement marked the end of the Whisper Trail that ran all the way down from Montana to the Mexican border without passing through a town or too near a ranchhouse. It squatted on the river, as silent and secretive during the day as an Indian burial-ground, near the only crossing within a hundred miles in either direction.

Old Mossback Mooney ran a way-station at Niggerhead for the men who rode the Whisper Trail. He sold them ammunition and grub, for high prices, and rot-gut Mexican whiskey that he brewed out of cactus. He bragged that he made his whiskey potent by adding tobacco-juice to give it color and a rattlesnake head for "bite." He was called Mossback because he only used the heads of the big moss-colored rattlesnakes that holed up in the brush thickets along the river.

Besides the outlaws who rode in, mostly at night, the men who frequented Mossback's place were *vaqueros* and woodchoppers who lived in brush-thatched *jacals* across the river. A harmless lot, on the whole. The settlement was cut off from the outside world and supplies had to be brought in by mule-train across towering mountains. There were a handful of ranches in Lonesome Valley, the little hollow that ran back from the crossing on the Texas side of the river, but beyond that a man could ride for two days in any direction without seeing a house or abode of any kind.

That was the main reason the Crossing and Lonesome Valley went bad. . . .

The outlaw who moved in called himself Turk. Nothing more. He burned out Casoose Uvalde and the Y-Up-And-Down. He killed a couple of ranchers and a few woodchoppers, just to make a show. Then he took over Niggerhead Crossing and set himself up as *jefe* of the settlement and surrounding country.

Turk collected a *propina* on every head of "wet" cattle run across the river. His men would steal stock in Tamaulipas and sell it to ranchers in Texas. . . . Then rustle the hoofed loot back across the border and collect a reward from the Mexican ranchers for recovering it. And there were other sinister, blood-spattered ways for a renegade like Turk to turn his stranglehold on the Crossing into cash.

If a wanted man had money, he was safe in Niggerhead or Lonesome Valley—as long as his *dinero* held out. After that his dead body might be turned over to the law for the bounty it would bring. There were no sheriffs and few Rangers in the unorganized counties between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. A crooked town marshal named Cass Rankin handled these ugly transactions for Turk. And he turned most of the reward money over to the *jefe*. . . .

Rangers and Rurales finally combined forces to wipe Turk out. Rumor had it that Town Marshal Cass Rankin had sold out his *compadre* for Ranger gold. But nobody knew, for certain, what had happened. Or whether Turk was really dead.

And now, after five years, history was repeating itself. . . .

* * *

The raid on the Y-UP-And-Down started off all right. The bunkhouse was empty. As soon as it had been scouted, and it was ascertained that the crew was absent, the three men rode openly into the ranch yard.

Pelon leaned from the saddle to rap on the door with the butt of his six-shooter. When Hob Crutchfield opened the door, he stared into the business end of a heavy gun gripped in a rock-steady hand.

Crutchfield was a *chili*-tempered old Chihuahua cowhand with a white beard that made his saddle-colored face look like wrinkled leather in the moonlight. He was dressed only in his long-handled red flannel underwear. He knew that he was looking death in the eye, but he was ornery and unafraid.

"I've heard of you, you back-shooting *cabron!*" he spat at Pelon, his voice croaking with rage.

That was as far as he got. Pelon was thumbing back the hammer of his six-shooter and Chiricahua Charlie was grabbing for his gun. Big Jess Farrow was pulling his horse around like he wanted to throw a little lead, too. But the horse was crow-hopping, although it had been gentle as a *carga* burro until now, and Big Jess found himself lurching against Pelon just as the Mexican shot.

Pelon missed, and his wrathful voice filled the night with loud-mouthed Mexican oaths as he jerked his horse away from Farrow's skittish bronc. Hob Crutchfield had stepped outside, and Chiricahua Charlie had him cut off from the door. Big Jess fired once as the old rancher ducked between the horses and sprinted for the brush, bare-footed and with his long-handles flapping in the breeze. His bullet kicked up dust at Crutchfield's feet, spurring him on.

In his eagerness, Chiricahua Charlie swung his mount in front of Farrow and the raging Pelon, and that was a mistake. Big Jess let go another shot and the lean, smoky-eyed border-jumper suddenly swayed and slid to the ground.

"Well, damn his ornery hide," said Big Jess, furiously. "He made me miss!"

"Miss, hell," squalled Pelon. "You've killed the wrong man!"

"He spurred right ag'in my gun barrel," said Big Jess, angrily. "He spoiled my shot. And you weren't helping things any trying to horn in and grab all the glory. Just wait until the boss hears about this!"

"Wait until the boss hears about it?" Pelon's face was vein-mottled, contorted with rage. "Why, you damned two-bit bungling *pelado!* Wait until he hears what *you've* done! You killed one of our men and let Hob Crutchfield make his getaway! Of all the fool stunts you could've pulled!"

"It was that blasted Cherryrow's fault," said Big Jess. "He was too eager to file a notch in his gun butt. You knowed how he was, and you should have kept him on a tight-rope. The boss will blame you for the simple reason you're calling this hoedown. It's your *baile!*"

"I ought to blast you out of the saddle!" Pelon choked out. Rage thickened his speech and his swarthy face turned as yellow as the moon. He had a six-shooter in his hand and Big Jess thought for a moment he was going to use it.

But Farrow had a smoking sixgun slanted across his own saddlehorn, and he and Pelon faced each other in the ranch yard like strange dogs with fangs bared and hackles lifted. And it was Pelon who finally shrugged his shoulders and turned his horse away.

"We'll let the *jefe* settle this," he muttered. "In the meantime, we'd better have a look-see around. Without a gun or horse, Crutchfield won't get far."

"The way you're running things," Big Jess charged, "he could lope right out of Lonesome Valley without you so much as smellin' the dust he kicked up. I've a notion you won't boss any more war parties, after El Tecolote hears how you blundered on this one!"

Pelon was faunching mad, but he didn't have the budge on Farrow and he let the remark ride for the moment. They loaded the dead 'Cherryrow' Charlie's body on his horse and rode off together. Each man was warily watchful and kept his hand near his gun. . . .

* * *

El Tecolote was frothing at the bit. The

Bert Lowe*

has switched to Calvert

because Calvert is mellower

*of 801 South 12th Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

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big, thick-built, black-haired, black-whiskered *jefe* stood on widespread, saddle-warped legs near the fire, and his wicked dead-black eyes raked the morose outlaw bunch like iron claws. His wrathy, ugly tones were meant to scrape hide and rub raw nerves rawer.

"A fine bunch of polecats," he grated, balefully. "Letting a handful of yellow-bellied sheepherders throw a scare into you! I ought to chunk the lousy lot of you in the river, and hire me some real tough hands!"

A taut, uneasy silence held. There wasn't a man in the outfit narrow enough between the horns to talk back to the *jefe* when he had a mad on. His slitted black eyes glittered almost insanely and one brush-scabbed hand worried the butt of a low-slung gun. . . .

Something had gone wrong with El Tecolote's carefully-laid plans. He'd ridden into an ambush at the Mexican spread, and lost two men to old Casoose Uvalde's straight-shooting *vaqueros*.

The Reno Kid had fared no better. He was nursing a bullet-wound in his gun arm and a pain-crazed temper that made him as dangerous as a rattlesnake with a broken back. His feverish eyes reflected the bleak thoughts of the rest of the gang.

It wouldn't be easy now. The Lonesome Valley ranchers were loose and on the prod. What had looked like a soft touch might well prove a lead ticket to hell for every jackleg *'buscadero* in the bunch.

"If the girl hadn't gotten away," El Tecolote started to say, harshly, then broke off as Pelon and the new recruit came riding into camp with the dead Chiricahua Charlie's body thrown across his horse and roped there like a chunk of venison.

"It was that damned Farrow's fault, boss!" Pelon's wrathy squall sounded before either man was out of the saddle. "The crazy son fouled things up like a kink in a wet catch-rope. He—"

"Pelon," said Big Jess, and his brittle tones cut through the Mexican's loud-mouthed ranting like the crack of a six-gun, "is a-trying to cover up his own blunder! His *mamacita* must have knocked his brains out with a churn-dasher when he was kneehigh to a jackass. *Chihuahua!* Him and this Cherryrow ain't fit help for a man to take along on a jackrabbit hunt—not even in broad daylight! No, by damn!"

Big Jess glared at Pelon. He swung in the saddle to face El Tecolote, but he was still watching the bald outlaw out of the corner of his hard eyes as he spoke.

"Pelon got rattled when he had Hob Crutchfield right in his gunsights," he charged, adamantly, "Cherryrow's bronc was actin' up, and spooked ag'in Pelon. And this locoed, hairles son put a slug through Cherryrow instead of Crutchfield! He pulled a boner that—"

"He lies, senor!" Pelon screamed. He had lost muscular control of his features, and a spasmodic tick made his face hideous. His hand suddenly flashed to the back of his neck, gripping the haft of a knife suspended in a scabbard between his shoulder blades.

"I'll carve the truth out of his black heart!" he raged. "I'll make him spill his guts, or whittle—"

The knife flashed in the moonlight, and Big Jess recoiled violently. By then he had a six-shooter in his hand, slanted across his saddlebow. The blade bit into his cheek, leaving a trail of blood, as the gun roared.

The heavy blast seemed to snatch away all the beserk Pelon's impulses. There was the ripping, tearing impact of a bullet striking flesh, like an echo to the sharp explosion, and the Mexican froze in the stirrups. His leaden eyes continued to glare at Big Jess for a taut interval.

Then he was slow-slumping from the saddle, falling headlong to the dust. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Buscadero Trail

BIG JESS still gripped the smoking six-shooter in his hand. His red-whiskered face wore an incredulous expression. He wiped blood from the gash in his cheek and stared from the man he had killed to the other outlaws.

"You saw how it happened," he managed, shakily. "The sneaking sidewinder drawed a knife on me! He'd a-chopped my head right off my neck if I hadn't gut-shot the damned fool first!" He shivered.

None of the outlaws moved except El Tecolote. The sinister *jefe* swayed a little forward, as if on the verge of going for his gun. His face was rock-hard and held a

predatory wildness. His bleak eyes were fastened on the heavy six-shooter that Big Jess pointed, as if by accident, in his direction.

"You've got eyes," Farrow insisted, indignantly. "That locoed devil was trying to lop my head off even with my shoulders. I had to plug the kill-crazy cuss!"

"Maybe," El Tecolote muttered, dead-toned. "Maybe no. All I can see, Farrow, is that you've caused the death of two of my best men. You swing a wide loop, hombre. Be damned careful you don't get tangled up in it yourself!"

"Blast it!" Big Jess returned, in outrage. "It was Pelon who put the quietus on things! He salivated Cherryrow, instead of Crutchfield. Then he tackled me. A knife really puts a chill in my guts. I'll shoot hell out of any man that pulls a *punal* on me!"

He holstered his gun. "But I don't aim to rile *you,* boss," he went on in more conciliatory tones. "You saw how Pelon acted up when I put the finger on him. I don't mind saying that if I'd been ramroddin' this little *pasear,* instead of the Mex, him and Cherryrow would still be alive. And it'd be Crutchfield with a bullet-hole through his worthless carcass, throwed across that saddle!"

"You talk big," growled the Reno Kid. "You talk like a man that cut his teeth on a claw-hammer and shot flies off his crib with a sixgun."

"And I can make it stick!" said Big Jess, flatly.

It was El Tecolote who answered him. "Maybe," said the *jefe,* his voice full of jarring warning. "Maybe no. What about the girl, Farrow?"

Big Jess looked surprised. "I don't follow you, boss," he said, frowning. "I left her tied to a blackthorn bush. That's all I know."

The Reno Kid cut him a baleful look. "*She's gone!*" he got out between clenched teeth. "She lit a shuck! And the ropes were cut!"

The Kid straightened slowly, a baffled expression on his scarred, young-old face. He stood on wide-spraddled legs, leaning a little toward Big Jess. He carried one arm like a chicken might carry a broken wing, but he was ambidextrous and could draw with lightning speed with either hand.

"There's something damned peculiar going on here," he said, jerkily. "You've been a jinx to this outfit from the start, Farrow. First you killed Pete. We all know he was drunk and on the prod when he jumped you. We didn't hold that ag'in you—hell, I even sided you when Pelon tried to buy in! And the boss showed he didn't pack a grudge by taking you into the gang.

"But since then you've plugged Pelon! I'm not sure as to what happened to Cherryrow, because you cut the Mex down before he had a chance to spill his story. That was one way to close his mouth.

"We rode in and found old Mossback's daughter gone," he finished, bitterly. "That explains why we ran into an ambush when we hit Lonesome Valley—and lost two men! You're supposed to be a member of the gang, Farrow. You were supposed to hog-tie the girl and keep her from spreading the alarm.

"So what happens? Without anybody's help, you've managed to wipe out half of our men! You've got us in a worse jackpot than if we'd run into a Ranger trap! *Just who the hell are you, anyway?*"

The silence that followed the Reno Kid's outburst was about as explosive as a line-camp stove fed with sticks of dynamite.

Big Jess tensed in the saddle. His lean face went hard with fury under the wide brim of his sweat-stained old hat. He caught the impact of El Tecolote's somber stare as he twisted his head.

The outlaws were all watching him. They'd seen him in action, knew that he was dangerous with a gun, and they were all waiting to back the Reno Kid's play.

But Big Jess didn't take the cue. His voice was loud with indignation as he lashed back at the Kid.

"I'm getting damned tired of being made the butt-end for all the blame around here," he rapped out, angrily. "Don't try to make me the goat just because *you* let things get haywire. Sure I tied the girl up. But Pelon rode back for a private talk with her after we left camp!

"Pelon," he said flatly, "had himself figured as the spur-jingler that put a *tequila* kick in a kiss and hung the moon. He wanted to make time with Mossback's good-looking daughter. You saw the way he was faunching around when the *jefe* brought her in. And she played him for a fool!

"Hell, I don't even pack a knife. But I'd bet my pistol ag'in a plugged *peso* that Pelon used one of his sneak *punals* to cut her loose. She probably made eyes at him and promised to meet him somewhere. But I could have told the ornery son," Big Jess was suddenly grinning, crookedly, "that he was wasting his time trying to court Wyeth Mooney!"

He put a rope-burned to his cheek, where Pelon's knife had laid it open, and his knowing grin left the impression that old Mossback's hell-cat daughter had slapped him there.

The Kid let out a shaky breath. "You makes things sound reasonable, Farrow," he said thinly, *"—too damned reasonable!"*

"A man that's whipped before he starts," Big Jess returned, contemptuously, "ain't apt to take blue chips out of the game. From the looks of things, you ran into a hornet's nest before you even knew what stung you. I had enough sense, at least, to scout the Y-Up-And-Down before the fireworks started."

He turned to El Tecolote.

"Reno drew a ringer," he went on, brazenly, "and now he's manufacturing excuses faster than a court-caught rustler. The rest of these tinhorns are just as bad. I cleaned out the Y-Up-And-Down—even though Pelon did kill Cherrycow and let Crutchfield get away. And I know these hills like the back of my hand. I could round in the rest of them Lonesome Valley homesteaders, if you'd give me a chance."

The Reno Kid's scarred face turned white with rage, but a gesture from El Tecolote silenced him. The *jefe's* eyes were cold and calculating.

"Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

"I didn't join up here to be a flunky," Big Jess told him, flatly. "I know how to pick a winner. I figured a man could string along with you and have his pockets bulging with greenbacks. And I still think I'm right.

"I don't mind taking orders—if I respect the man that's giving them. But the way I look at it, Reno's a loser. He's ready to cave in like a quirt-whipped all-tucked cur-dog just because he ran into a little trouble at the Hernandez spread. But any outfit that's worth its salt needs a *segundo*.

"I'd like to have that *segundo's* job. I know I can handle it. Give me until sun-up and I'll prove it to you. I'll have them homesteaders back here—roped and hog-tied and ready for you to run your brand on 'em!"

"That's just loud-mouthed brag!" the Reno Kid snarled. His hand was on his gun and his eyes were wild with rage.

"But it's brag I can back up," Big Jess grinned, cheerfully. He turned to El Tecolote. "How about it, boss? You letting me hoe in high cotton for a change?"

El Tecolote studied him through narrowed eyes that were as cold and brittle as chips of black ice. "I like a man with sand in his craw," he said, finally. "How many will you need to back your play?"

Big Jess shook his head. "I don't want anybody underfoot," he said. "This is one jackpot I aim to rake in myself. You want 'em brought here?"

"No," muttered the *jefe*, moodily. "We're moving on Niggerhead tonight. I've got an old score to settle. . . ."

He seemed to forget, or ignore, Big Jess Farrow for the moment. He squatted on his long hunkers, staring into the fire. His black-whiskered face was drawn in bitter lines and his mouth jerked down at the corners.

And whatever he was thinking, Big Jess figured as he turned and rode out of camp, spelled hell's own brand of devilment for somebody. . . .

El Tecolote nodded to the Reno Kid.

"Follow him," he ordered. "Trail him wherever he's going. You can leave the carcass under a cutbank somewhere. . . ."

THE rain started right after that, a cold, dismal downpour that left the ground underfoot soggy and uncertain and had the brush dripping water. The cloudbanks were gray, reflecting light. A rider couldn't penetrate the dense, thorny thickets for more than a few feet without being soaked to the skin and shivering in the saddle.

It was a morose, embittered bunch of homesteaders gathered in the rain around a small sagebrush fire in a hollow in the rough hills above Lonesome Valley.

There was Hob Crutchfield, with his bloody, gravel-bruised feet encased in rawhide moccasins borrowed from an Indian sheepherder. He had a gun now, taken from one of the Uvalde *vaqueros* who would never have use for it again.

The *vaquero* lay back in the shadows from the fire, moaning a little as his life bubbled out of a frothy bullet-hole in his chest. . . .

Juan Hernandez squatted across from Hob, as wrinkled and withered and old as a century plant that has lived out its span. The leathery little Mexican had fought in a dozen revolutions and ridden with the Rurales. But he knew when the cards were stacked against them.

Casoose Uvalde sat cross-legged on his spread poncho, as though unaware of the rain. The years had added weight to his rawboned frame. His heavy features were parchment dry and as expressionless as those of a mummy.

But Uvalde kept twisting his head to look at the dying *vaquero,* and one huge fist clenched and unclenched on the haft of a knife. One would have thought the knife was tearing at the old rancher's heart. . . .

Two Mexican riders and one of Hob Crutchfield's *Tejano* brush-poppers completed the little group. The three men had been on watch up on the ridge until the rain started. Now they huddled near the fire, trying to absorb its warmth.

The rest of the Y-Up-And-Down crew were making a beef drag through the Tamaulipas roughs below the border, and Hob didn't expect them back for a couple of weeks. The fact that he was short-handed had the cowman feeling as frustrated as an old renegade bull that's been whipped out of the heifer herd.

"I'd give my left leg," he growled, impotently, "to be twenty years younger right now!" He spat viciously into the fire.

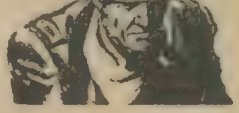
"IF WE could only get word to the Rangers. . . ." Hernandez muttered.

"There ain't a Ranger within a hundred miles," was Casoose Uvalde's gloomy reply. "And if you ask me, we were lucky to get out of Lonesome Valley alive." He looked around the fire at the dejected cattlemen, and asked, "Any of you ever hear of this 'El Tecolote' sidewinder before?"

Nobody said anything. Juan Hernandez shook his grizzled head, after an uneasy interval.

"One of my men was at Mossback's place," he said, "when Senorita Wyeth came riding in like the devil was eating trail dust behind her and scratching saddle leather for a tail-holt. She told him El Tecolote had started for my spread, to wipe me out. She said he was sending crews to your *casa* and the Y-Up-And-Down.

"He didn't wait to hear any more," Hernandez finished. "He barely beat the outlaws to my place, the way it was. I managed to get word to you. But I thought Hob was down in Tamaulipas with his drag wagon, so I didn't send a rider to the Y-Up-And-Down. With just one man



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away, I was left short-handed and had to pull out."

"We're not fighting men," Uvalde put in, helplessly. "And those hombres are gun-hawks—the scum of the border! Without help from the law, I don't see how we can—"

"All we can do," Hob Crutchfield interrupted, his voice full of cranky violence, "is hole up here in the roughs like coyotes when a real killer wolf is in the country!" He glared balefully around him.

"What could three old whiskey-soaked has-beens like us do ag'in them lead-slinging hellions?" he demanded. "Not a damned thing until we get help from somewhere! And I don't know where we'll get it," he added, dismally.

The silence was like that of the grave as the outcasts of Lonesome Valley considered their plight. Darkness squatted over the wet hills like vultures waiting for a victim to cease its hopeless struggling.

Gangs like El Tecolote's were no novelty along the outlaw-infested border in the year 1873. Almost to a man, brush riders were gamblers, horse-thieves, gun-toting mavericks and cutthroat breeds looking for profitable deviltry. The Rangers were undermanned and overworked, with hundreds of miles of isolated frontier to patrol. Their nearest station was two hundred miles up the river.

That made the law in Lonesome Valley almost a joke. . . .

Immersed in bitter thoughts, none of the ranchers heard the click of shod hoofs on a rocky stretch of the ridge above them. Nor the creak of wet saddle leather as a man dismounted and cautiously scouted the camp.

That's how the long-built man came to have the drop on them before Hob Crutchfield or any of the others realized there was anybody within miles of their hideout. The tall man stood limned against the night, a heavy six-shooter balanced in his hand. His voice rapped out a command.

"Don't anybody move! I'm coming in!"

The men around the fire sat frozen as he advanced slowly out of the shadows. He was wearing a yellow slicker, the kind that most cowpunchers wore, and it had a wet shine in the out-flung light. Under the soggy wide brim of his rain-soaked old hat, his lean face relaxed in a grin.

"Just keep your shirts on, gents," he drawled, holstering his gun. "I'm feeling plumb peaceful tonight. Save your powder and lead for more deserving parties!"

Hob Crutchfield was the first to recover from the shock of seeing him. "It's—it's one of them damned hellions that raided my ranch!" he gasped, incredulously. His smoke-blue eyes narrowed to glinting slits and his hand dropped to his gun.

"Talk fast, hombre!" he rasped. "Who the hell are you? How did you know where to find us? Who told you about this hideout?"

"Simmer down, old-timer," the tall man smiled. "If I'd aimed to make a shooting war out of it, I'd have kept the budge while I had it. And it would have been easy enough for me to plug you instead of Cherrycow back at the Y-Up-And-Down!"

"That was kind of peculiar," Crutchfield admitted. "That bald-headed Mex meant to blast me right between the eyes, but you spurred your horse ag'in his and spoiled his aim. Then you dropped the other un'—Cherrycow. I heard you two geezers augerin' over whose fault it was after I was hid out in the brush."

The tall man chuckled. "You were sure a sight," he reminisced, "scratchin' gravel with your bare feet and with them long-handles a-flappin' in the breeze!"

"I don't see a dad-blamed thing funny about it!" the cowman snarled, wrathfully. "And you still ain't told us how you found this place!"

The tall man's face hardened. "Wyeth Mooney told me you had a hideout in the hills. I'll answer your other question by asking one myself. Did you ever know a kid puncher who called himself Johnny? He had red hair and a bad scar that ran from his eye all the way down to his chin. He was happy-go-lucky and ready to grin or fight at the drop of a hat."

"Sure," was Crutchfield's prompt reply. "He was wild as they come, but a man couldn't help liking the young cuss. He showed up here at the Crossing, on the dodge. He was—" The old cowman bit off whatever else he had to say, and stared into the fire.

The tall man nodded, bleakly. "I know," he said. "Johnny was my brother. His last name was Farrow. He wasn't really bad—just headstrong and reckless. He got

in a jam up in Montana, and had to rattle his hocks for a healthier climate.

"When the trouble up north blowed over," he continued, "I trailed Johnny here. I didn't find any lead, at first, and started asking embarrassing questions. Town Marshal Cass Rankin was afraid I'd queer him with the Rangers, so he pinned a horse-stealing charge on me. I was railroaded to the pen. But I found out later what happened, and now I'm back."

The Lonesome Valley men had seen tough hands come and go. But the way the long-built man said ". . . now I'm back!" sent a shiver up more than one spine.

"You called yourself Montana," Hob Crutchfield interposed. "I remember you now—though prison and a busted nose and them whiskers sure change your looks. You hit here right after the Rurales and Rangers run Turk out. You were lolly-gagging around old Mossback's daughter, and he kept threatening to take a scattergun loaded with rock salt and bacon rind and blister your backside!"

"Mossback," grinned Big Jess Farrow, "don't think any man that sets a saddle is good enough for his wildcat daughter. He'd take a doubled wet catch-rope to any spur-jingler that tried to court her!"

"Just who," Casoose Uvalde wanted to know, "is this devil El Tecolote? I've never heard of a Mexican *bandido* here on the border by that name."

The answer was brittle as a gun-crack. "El Tecolote," said Big Jess, harshly, "is no Mexican. He's a gringo. A polecat can change his name but not his stripe or nationality. He'd answer just as quick to his real moniker—*Turk!*"

There were muttered oaths. An uneasy silence that stretched back over five years of anxiety and hatred and resentment. Then Hob Crutchfield turned sharp old eyes on the long-built man and asked the question uppermost in every mind.

"But what can *we* do about it? They've got us outnumbered and out-gunned from the start! And where do you fit in the picture, Farrow? We—"

"Ain't you heard yet?" Big Jess grinned at him, crookedly. "I throwed in with El Tecolote. I'm his *segundo*. I promised him I'd trail-herd the pack of you to old Mossback's place by sun-up."

THE RAIN had stopped, but the air was damp and biting cold. A waning moon showed the huddled shacks and the long, low, 'dobe-walled saloon that made up Niggerhead Crossing.

Nobody thought anything when an owl hooted somewhere up the valley. Nobody, that is, except old Mossback Mooney, and his fingers only tightened on the bar-rag that he was using to polish whiskey glasses.

It was quiet in the saloon. The hour hand, which was the only hand left on the battered alarm clock hanging on the wall, pointed at the Roman IV. A couple of drifters were drinking old Mossback's peculiar brand of forty-rod. Four Mexicans were playing *cubalette* at a table in the corner, and the click of poker dice and their low laughter and talk were the only sounds in the saloon.

Out back somewhere old Mossback's daughter was readying a belated supper of *tacos* and *ranchero* beans. The rich-flavored aroma of her cooking floated through the connecting door.

The call of the *tecolote* sounded again, and this time more than one man looked up. Near at hand like that, it didn't sound quite natural. And while they waited, a little puzzled, dark, phantom shapes materialized under the moon. Hoofs ruffled the street dust—not moving fast, but slow and even. It was the sound of horses held in tight rein.

A look of momentary wildness came into old Mossback Mooney's bleached eyes as dark-dressed riders on solid-colored horses poured into the Crossing like wolves out of the night. One of the Mexicans bolted for the back door.

But a man appeared there. He was a tall, slim man wearing tight-legged *charro* britches and a gold-spangled hat. He neither spoke nor smiled, nor made a move toward the gun at his hip. But the Mexican paled and moved back from the door.

Saddle leather creaked and more men filed into the saloon. The man in the lead was tall ,thick-shouldered, with a saturnine face and a slitted mouth that was like a gash below his drooping black mustache. His dead-black eyes flicked about him with the impact of a whip-lash. A cigarette dangled from his lips and he spoke around it.

"I'm El Tecolote. I'm taking over. Any-

body tries to leave, they'll be shot. Dump your guns on the bar and line up against the wall."

Nobody said anything. The Mexicans looked scared. One of the drifters wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and managed a weak grin, but the grin faded when El Tecolote looked at him. The *jefe* moved to the bar. His unblinking stare touched Mossback with quick malice.

"Remember me?" he asked, almost idly. The saloonman nodded and licked his lips. "Sure, Turk—I mean Tecolote." His hand shook a little as he spilled whiskey into a glass and shoved it across the bar..

El Tecolote stared at the glass, without touching it. He seemed to forget the other men in the room. His eyes were dismal and his black-whiskered face was drawn in bitter lines. He kept glancing toward the door, as if expecting something, and the butt of his heavy six-shooter glinted each time he swiveled his head.

One of the outlaws shoved Wyeth Mooney through the back door. There was a bloody furrow across his cheek and the girl's blouse was torn, her bosom heaved defiantly.

"I caught her trying to slip out of the corrals," said the outlaw, breathing hard. "She damn' near clawed my eyes out when I yanked her out of the saddle!"

"Tie her up," said El Tecolote.

Mossback started to protest, but he swallowed whatever he had to say when El Tecolote looked at him. The *jefe's* dead-black eyes silenced him completely.

It was then that two other outlaws came through the front door, dragging something behind them. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Powder Justice

THE 'something' was a cringing hulk with loose, quivering lips, a sagging paunch and a bald head. A law badge was pinned to his dirty barber-pole shirt. There was dirt and horse dung on his pants, to show he'd been dragged across the street, and his pale eyes bulged with unholy terror when the outlaws jerked him erect in front of El Tecolote.

"We found him hiding under a bed in a Mexican *jacal,*" one of them said, in a voice filled with loathing and disgust. "He's been begging and belly-crawling all the way!"

"Hello, Cass." The renegade *jefe's* grin was ghastly. "Long time no see."

Town Marshal Cass Rankin was quaking in his boots. Only the strong grip on his arms kept him from collapsing to the floor.

"I didn't do it, Turk!" The high-pitched, nasal scream ended on a whining note. "I didn't sell you out to the Rangers! It was a mistake! I—"

"Sure it was a mistake," agreed the *jefe,* in a voice that was doubly dangerous because of its softness. He turned and walked to the end of the bar. He took down the long, shot-laden bull-whip that old Mossback kept there to break up drunken brawls. He flicked the whip and the braided end cracked like a pistol shot in the taut silence.

"You made a lot of mistakes, Cass," he grated, and brought the whip down across the cringing lawman's shoulders.

The wire-hard round of leather bit through shirt and skin to raw flesh. Cass Rankin's pain-crazed scream seemed to jar the rafters. He whirled and made a run for the door, but the whip cut him down as if his legs had been roped from under him.

The *jefe's* face was a twisted mask of savagery and hatred as he swung the whip at his one-time confederate. His black eyes glittered almost insanely. His lips curled back from big yellow teeth closed with the stubborn intensity of a lobo with a death grip on an adversary.

It was as cold-blooded as pole-axing a steer in a slaughterhouse. Rankin tried to crawl to the door. Then he was groveling and sobbing on the floor, and his wild shrieks of agony had more than one man looking white around the gills. Case-hardened renegades were wincing each time the whip-end thudded soggily into quailing flesh.

Rankin's sobs had subsided to whimpering gasps when the *jefe* finally laid the blood-wet whip on the bar. The big outlaw was breathing hard, his arm heavy with weariness, and his face showed an oily sheen of sweat.

"Leave him lay," the *jefe* growled, glaring at the quivering, bloody wreck. "I'll put a bullet through his skull after a while."

He picked up the glass of whiskey and downed it at a gulp. His eyes were dismal and the bitterness had never left his face.

The windows showed the gray stain of dawn. Fog hugged the muddy river. Chickens crowed intermittantly. Somewhere down the valley a burro greeted the chill, damp morning with raucous braying, and the outlaw who had gone outside to get sick straightened suddenly and let out a startled yell. He whirled back into the saloon.

"It's them homesteaders!" he shouted, excitedly. "The Reno Kid has the whole cavvy roped in the saddle and is riding herd on 'em!"

The renegades silently trailed him outside to watch the Kid bring in his prisoners. But the black-whiskered *jefe* paused in the doorway, his narrowed eyes suspicious and wary. He seemed to sense a trap of some kind. But there was no mistaking the Kid's slim shape—nor the slumped, dejected homesteaders riding in single file behind him, each man with his wrists roped to the saddlehorn.

The Kid's thin face looked gray and ghastly in the pale light. His mouth was strained. He had improvised a sling for his wounded arm, and blood had soaked through the cloth and stained his shirt He carried a carbine across his saddlebow. A slicker hung over his thin shoulders.

The prisoners all wore slickers, unbuttoned in front, and there was something queer in their stance and the way each pair of arms were tied to the saddlehorn. Something awkward that rubbed its razor-sharp edge of warning across the outlaw *jefe's* raw nerves. . . .

"Look out!" the Kid suddenly yelled. "It's a trap!"

It was a trap—and a clever one. Old Hob Crutchfield's bony hands came out from under his slicker with a brace of .44's. The empty sleeves of his slicker had been stuffed with reed-grass and roped to the saddlehorn, leaving his arms free and hidden at his side. His panther squall was a signal for a dozen guns to flash into view all down the line.

The outlaws on the saloon porch were caught flat-footed. One of them slapped leather and went down under a crash of gunfire. Another suddenly backed against the wall, his nerveless fingers no longer capable of gripping a pistol butt, and the hat that lay at his feet had a new red lining.

El Tecolote leaped back as a bullet splintered the door facing and thudded into the bar. All hell broke loose in the street as he whirled toward the back door of the saloon. He stopped as if he'd run into a 'dobe wall.

Big Jess Farrow stood there, thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt. His hat clung to the back of his head and he was faintly smiling. But the bleakness of his eyes matched the black fury in the outlaw *jefe's* virulent stare.

"It's been a long trail, Turk—or Tecolote. Which name had you rather be buried under?"

"It doesn't matter," said the outlaw. Time was running out, but he moved to the bar and poured himself a drink. His dead-black eyes studied Farrow. "I'm curious. What's your game? You packin' a law badge pinned to your undershirt?"

Big Jess shook his head. "I'm repping for a dead man, Turk. You killed him. Cass Rankin turned his dead body in for a penny-ante bounty—the kind the Rangers give for any badman brought in across a saddle. He didn't rate any more. He was just a wild kid who got off on the wrong foot and might have gone straight if given the chance. He was my brother."

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"I see," said the outlaw, and dropped his drink and slapped fingers for the butt of his gun.

The roar of two heavy six-shooters came almost together. A gigantic, invisible hand struck Big Jess a numbing blow high in the side and knocked him back against the wall. He hung there, dazed. A red mist obscured his vision. Through the mist and a cloud of pungent, roiling powdersmoke, he saw the outlaw break at the neck and knees and waist and crumple slowly to the floor.

The ripping, tearing impact of the bullet, slicing through hard muscle and flesh to gouge at his ribs, left Big Jess weak and shaken. But he had enough strength left in his long, saddle-bowed legs to stagger across the floor and kick the smoking gun from the dying outlaw's hand. The racket in the street seemed faint, far away, as he stared down at the man.

The dismal bitterness was gone from the outlaw's eyes. A crooked smile faded slowly from his lips. . . .

The heavy blast of a shotgun jerked Big Jess around. Old Mossback Mooney had let go with one barrel of his sawed-off shoulder-buster across the bar.

"Cass Rankin," growled Mossback, "grabbed the gun you kicked out of Turk's hand. He was all set to plug you where your suspenders cross."

He patted the short stock of the scattergun. "But there's one barrel still loaded," he added, ominously, "with rock salt and bacon rind. I'm saving it for any saddle tramp that tries to play fast and loose with my daughter!"

Big Jess grinned back at him, foolishly. . . .

* * *

Town Marshal Cass Rankin was dead, and it was the general opinion that Mossback should be given some kind of medal for ridding the country of a crooked badge-toter. Old Hob and the other homesteaders had the few remaining members of the cowed, well-whipped outlaw bunch herded into the saloon to wait for the Rangers.

And Crutchfield, full of whiskey and brag, was telling it scary about Big Jess Farrow.

Big Jess, according to Hob, was a one-man army. He'd thrown in with the renegades and made boothill bait out of nearly half of El Tecolote-Turk's men before the *jefe* even became suspicious. Then he'd captured the Reno Kid, who was all set to bushwhack him, and used the little killer to spring a gun-trap on the rest of the gang. All of the shells had been taken out of the Kid's saddle gun and six-shooter, and he'd been forced to ride in at the head of the Lonesome Valley ranchers—a ruse that had effectively turned the tables on the raiders.

"Where is that long drink of water?" Hob Crutchfield loudly demanded, pounding on the bar with a gnarled fist. "I want to shake his hand. Hell, every saddle-polisher in Lonesome Valley will want to shake his hand and buy him a drink!"

"He's out back with Wyeth," grinned Mossback Mooney. "She's bandaging a bullet-rip in his side. He ain't hurt bad, but from the way that gal of mine has been carrying on, you'd think he was ready for a coffin!"

He scowled. "But she's had time to bandage a dozen wounds by now. And I ain't heard a peep out of either of 'em in half an hour. Maybe I'd better fetch Big Jess. . . ." He looked suddenly worried as he headed for the back of the saloon.

He was gone only an instant, then the others heard him squall like a panther that's just stepped into a bear trap. He plunged back into the saloon and grabbed up his scattergun. His faded old eyes were wild with rage and his gray beard was stiff as the tail of a renegade bull on the warpath.

"The damn' highbinder rode off with her!" he screamed, dashing to the front door. He waved the gun. "The ornery devil stole her right out from under my nose! He stole my gal! I'll kill him if it's the last thing I ever do!"

He would have loped after them on foot if Casoose and Hob Crutchfield hadn't grabbed him. It was several minutes before they had him quieted down enough for the Mexican to talk.

"But he asked me about the *padre* across the river," said Casoose, imploringly.

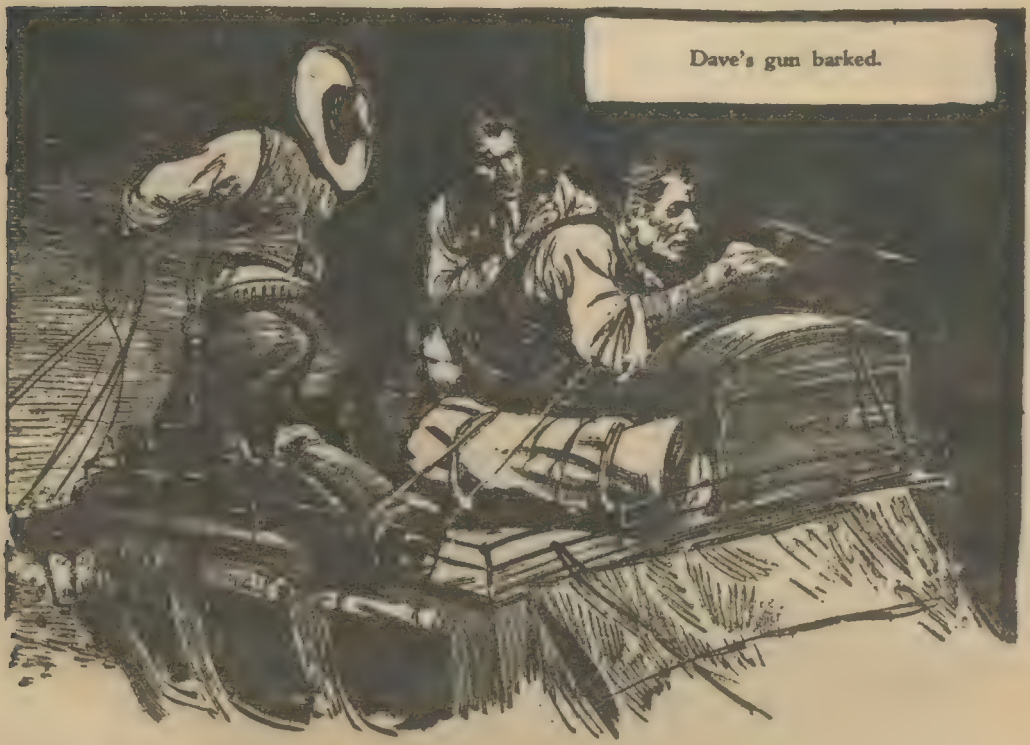
"You mean they're aiming to get hitched?" Mossback looked startled. "Well, I'll be hornswoggled!"

THE END

Son of the Fighting Breed

By ISABEL STEWART WAY

Out of the twisted back-trail that had put the Oregon boot on his right leg, Dave Lockhart won the chance to prove himself the brand of fighting man who would die with a gun in his fist against fifteen-to-one odds—or would swing from a cottonwood for one last, brave try!



DAVE LOCKHART wasn't used to riding on a cushion. Without a horse under him, his long body seemed cramped and, right now, there was little he could do to ease his position. The heavy steel bands of an Oregon boot were locked securely about his left ankle, and his handcuffed wrists sagged on his knees. If he moved, it meant disturbing the other two passengers. It meant waking up the man beside him—the middle-aged man who wore a small gold U. S. Marshal's badge on a pocket flap of his open leather vest.

Dave's lips quirked ever so slightly. It might not be healthy to wake Thad Vroman too suddenly, he thought. The marshal slept with the muzzle of his gun nested firmly and steadily against Dave's ribs. Marshal Thad Vroman was a sick man, and he'd had little chance to sleep on the long way back to Silver City. An officer can't, when he's taking a prisoner back to be tried for murder, but this third night was too much. Sleep caught him.

Dave looked across at the other passenger, a girl of perhaps eighteen, whose face was a pale blur against the shadows inside the jolting stage. Dave's lean young face went haggard as he looked at her, for Lola King was the sister of the man Dave had killed. She had been visiting in Calico City when it happened. Now she was traveling

all the long weary way back to be a witness at Dave's trial. In fact, it was her testimony that would probably send him to the gallows, and that knowledge had hung like a heavy stifling cloud between them, all the long journey through.

Dave gave a small sigh, turned his blue eyes out the window as the road-scarred Concord rattled through the Devil's Graveyard—the bad lands where dry parched earth had given birth to naked dead buttes and cracked lava beds, under a blanket of shifting hot sands.

Dave had never regretted the killing back there. Even if he were hanged for it, he still knew that it was a job well done—killing off Preston King, making him pay for cheating Dave's invalid father out of everything he had in the world. His ranch . . . his herds of cattle . . . the results of years of hard work.

No, he could only look upon it all as a job well done, but—well, ever since Lola King got into the stage-coach for the trip back to Calico City . . . all neat and trim in her blue traveling clothes, with the blue bonnet tied over her curly copper-red hair. . . . Dave had wished that they could have met otherwise. Sometimes he had wondered what would have happened, had he known she was there, visiting her brother; if they had met first.

He wished, at least, that she could understand how it all happened. Maybe then she wouldn't stay so stormy-eyed, as if hatred smouldered hotter within her, every day.

The coach rolled onto an easier trail and, looking out into the night, Dave saw that they had left the Graveyard lava road to drop off the mesa toward San Dimas, a stage stop.

Dave spoke into the shadows. "We'll soon be stopping for twenty minutes. It'll be a rest for you!"

Lola King jerked her head around and for a moment he thought she was going to speak, but she didn't. She turned back toward the window, her body still held in that rigid aloofness.

Something drove Dave on to more speech. "Just another night and half a day," he said, "then we'll be in Calico City. By tomorrow noon your long journey will be finished."

She spoke then. "I'm quite aware that the stage gets there at noon," she said coolly. "I went over this same route last summer when I went to—to visit my brother."

Dave could say no more. Her words brought the killing all back afresh, and put a barrier past which Dave could give no explanation. He sank back in silence, watching the small town take shape amid the shadows. It was past nine when the stage rolled down the main street, a long tunnel of darkness between two rows of high-fronted buildings. The windows of three saloons showed feeble light at the farther end, and halfway between two coal-oil lanterns burned at the entrance of the Palace Hotel, where the stage stopped.

The driver climbed swiftly down off the box, came around and opened the door for Lola King to alight. "Twenty minutes, Miss," he said. "You can get a good meal in the hotel!"

She nodded, went over to the door of the Ladies' Parlor. The driver stood there, peering in at Dave and the marshal. "Oh, Thad's asleep!" he exclaimed, and reached out a hand to shake the sleeping man's shoulder.

Dave said, "Move that gun over, will you, before you jerk him awake?"

The driver nodded, gently angled the blue muzzle away from Dave's ribs, and then he quickly cuffed the marshal awake. Dave smiled wryly, knowing the man's thoughts. This was getting toward familiar country. If Dave were going to try to escape, it would be somewhere near here, where he could hope to hide out among friends. In fact, the man probably thought Dave would be a fool *not* to make the attempt, since he was pretty sure to be convicted and hanged otherwise.

Fleetingly, Dave wondered why he hadn't taken that brief moment, after Lola King had left the coach, to grab Vroman's gun. With it, he might have forced the marshal to unlock the handcuffs, the boot. Well, he hadn't . . . maybe because he was waiting, for just what, he didn't know.

It was too late now. Marshal Vroman was blinking, but awake. Handing his rifle to the driver, he stumbled across the street to the trough in front of the Stockmen's Bank, and soused his head in the cold water. When he came back he was wide awake enough, but nobody had to look twice to know he was a sick man.

"Want to go in and eat, Dave?" he asked.

Dave shook his head. He hadn't eaten since mid-day, but his stomach had little desire for food; especially when it had to be eaten at the same table, most likely, with Lola King.

Then he remembered that the marshal, too, had need of food. "I'll sit with you," he offered.

Vroman shook his head. "It's my stomach," he said. "I've got somethin' like a hot iron searin' at my insides. It's a good thing I found you when I did, Dave, or I'd have never been able to keep up the chase. Somethin' pretty bad is wrong with me."

"You'll be fine when you get back to Doc Peters," Dave said awkwardly.

The other shook his head, and Dave looked at him with new respect. Thad Vroman, too, was pretty sure he was going home to Calico City to die, yet he gave everything he had to do the job at hand.

A little silence, then Vroman offered, "Want to walk around a bit? Stretch your legs?"

Dave glanced down at the heavy iron boot on his left ankle, and his lips pulled to a thin smile. "No, I guess not!"

"You ain't smoked all day," the other persisted. "Out o' tobacco?"

Dave nodded. "But it don't matter. A good time to break a bad habit, while I'm still young!"

The marshal called the hostler, handed him a dollar and jerked his head toward the cigar counter in the hotel. When the man had gone, Vroman leaned against the coach door. "Look, Dave. I wouldn't feel so bad about takin' you back if there was a speck of hope that you wasn't guilty. This Lola King heard you come and call her brother out, and she heard the shot. Nobody saw you actually kill Preston King, but you ain't once denied it."

"I killed him, all right," Dave said levelly. "I'm not denyin' it. I wouldn't have done it if I'd have known his sister was there in the house," he added, "not that night, but I'd have got him sooner or later. He rooked Dad out of everything he had. Law didn't help. The judge admitted the deal was irregular, but said it was legal, and losin' what he'd worked so hard for, all his life, killed Dad. My mother died right after, partly from the shock of losin' Dad, and partly because there was no money left to get her what she needed. So I killed King. That's all there is to it."

"It would have been easier to put your story over," the marshal observed tiredly, "if you hadn't lit out and run off."

"That was a mistake." Dave admitted.

SILENCE fell then. Dave looked out the opposite coach window, found himself gazing at the bank, whose windows reflected the lanterns from the hotel like two staring eyes. Dave's face went grimmer, for his connections with that bank hadn't been

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pleasant ones, either. Zeke Bodine, the cashier, who did some law business on the side, had represented Preston King in the shady deal that had started all the trouble.

It was a relief when the groom brought the fresh horses, hooked them in. The new driver came out, followed by the shotgun guard, and both of them climbed up to the box.

Lola King came from the hotel. Vroman helped her in, and her skirts brushed Dave as she took her place in the far corner—as far away from him as she could get on the opposite seat. Vroman himself followed, settling himself wearily beside Dave for the long trip ahead. He leaned across Dave to pull the door shut . . . stopped as a slightly-built dark man came up. He was a small man with a boyish face, but with a hardness to his dark eyes that gave the lie to his innocent young looks. Twin guns hung from concho-studded belts; vertical rows of the shining discs down each black trouser leg. "Howdy, Dave!" he greeted smoothly.

"Hi, Concho!" Dave exclaimed, and his heart beat faster. The last time he'd seen Concho Marno, the little man was headed for the border, riding fast. Concho frequently left a town that way, for he was a gambler who knew more methods to win a jackpot that Hoyle dreamed of. Usually he stayed away, at least for a long time, but here he was . . . and something pretty important must have brought him.

Dave knew what it was, all at once . . . and knew what he'd been waiting for. Concho was his friend, a relationship that began one day, three years before, when Dave roped him out of the gully-washer that was carrying the litttle gambler and his horse to sure death. Concho had never forgotten, and Dave was sure he'd come to help him now. To help him escape!

Suddenly, Dave hoped it was that. The nearer he got to Calico City, the more hopeless his chances to escape hanging seemed . . . and now he wanted to live. Maybe he wanted to live because of the girl in the corner . . . or maybe because he was young. He looked at Concho, met the other's significant gaze.

Perhaps Vroman saw the gaze, for he called out roughly, "We're ready, driver!" and again worked his gun until the muzzle touched Dave's ribs. "Close the door, Marno!" he ordered.

Concho smiled apologetically, slipped inside and took the seat beside Lola, then closed the door. The driver cracked his whip and the six-horse string plunged down the dark street.

As they passed one of the lighted saloons, they saw the silhouetted forms of a group of mounted men, circling the saloon to hit into the alley. One rode with a queer stiffness and Dave cried out, "See that man, Concho?"

"Sure!" Concho returned in his smooth tones; for no reason at all he added, irrelevantly, "They say the bullet Gyp Ragan got in that Dodge City fight never did get taken out. It's still in there, pressin' against his spine. Makes him ride funny."

Dave felt the marshal jerk. "What's this talk about Ragan?" he demanded. "Gyp Ragan's gang is workin' up in Montana!"

Concho shrugged. "I counted ten men ridin' back there," he observed. "But it could be a bunch of cowboys ridin' home after a night in town."

Vroman sat silent, and Dave knew he was pondering what to do. A man who rode stiff-shouldered with nine others. Always the Ragan gang—an ugly bunch of outlaws who held up many a train and shot the mail-clerks down in cold blood—numbered ten. When they came into a town, it boded no good. Vroman turned about, as if he could look backward through the darkness, then he shrugged, sank tiredly back upon the cushions. A bird in hand, he probably reasoned, was better than ten flying in the bush. There was a sheriff's office at San Dimas, and plenty of deputies. He had to be on to Calico City.

The driver's long whip cracked again and the Concord rolled on. The four passengers inside sank into silence. Lola King huddled in her corner, her face a luminous glow from the moonlight streaming in. Vroman's chin sank to his chest and from his irregular breathing, Dave knew that he was wrestling with the pain again . . . pain and weariness.

The little gambler opposite Dave sat quietly, but after a long time Dave felt the pressure of Concho's foot against his own. And Concho said, smoothly, but with an emphasis meant for Dave's ears, "The stage reaches 'Dobe Wells just before dawn, doesn't it?"

Vroman grunted an affirmative and again

silence settled. Dave tried to keep his body from telegraphing its tension down the muzzle of the marshal's gun. So the break was to be at 'Dobe Wells! There was no way for Concho to tell Dave what the plans were, but he wanted Dave to be ready, to act quickly when he was freed, and the time was at hand.

Elation filled Dave, and he realized how great had been the burden upon him. He was suddenly conscious of the weight of the iron boot on his ankle, the cut of the handcuffs on his wrists. He'd feel their weight for a long, long time, after he was free. *Free!*

He wondered how it would be . . . and then he was conscious of Concho's twin guns. There'd be shooting, of course. Dave glanced at Lola quickly. She'd be in no danger, certainly; Concho would see to that, for the little gambler was overly-polite, even to dance-hall girls. But Vroman— Dave frowned as he thought of the marshal. He'd fight to the limit to hold his prisoner, and he was too sick a man to go through that.

While Dave still held his troubled thoughts, the stage slowed down. Concho stuck his head out th window. "Man, flaggin' us down!" he said briefly, then answered Dave's unspoken question with a quick negative nod. The newcomer had nothing to do with the break, then; in fact, from Concho's manner, Dave gathered that he would be no help to the plan.

Dave himself knew that when the stage stopped and he saw the man who waited in the moonlight, standing by a fork in the road. For he knew the stout round-faced man, dressed in dark broadcloth with a white shirtfront showing starkly against the night. It was Zeke Bodine, cashier of the bank back at San Dimas. Carrying a bulky tooled leather valise, he climbed aboard, wedged himself in beside Dave.

The driver called down, "If it's crowded in there, Mr. Bodine, I can put your baggage on top!"

"Never mind!" the plump man returned. "I'll hold it! No need for extra trouble!" and he shifted the valise to his knees.

The stage rolled on, and Dave's mind was still filled with turmoil. There was the old worry of what would happen to Vroman in the break . . . and the new worry about Zeke Bodine coming into the picture. Hatred was there, too . . . a slow boiling hatred toward the man who had helped Preston King start the dirty ruckus that led to his killing.

Dave thought, vindictively, *"If Zeke Bodine gets killed in the tangle, so much to the good!"*

Suddenly Zeke spoke, as his eyes had just got used to the dark interior. "Why, it's you, Miss King! Surely you remember me—your brother's legal counsellor?"

"Yes, I remember you," she returned briefly. "Good evening, Mr. Bodine." Then she turned her face toward the window again.

Zeke Bodine was not affected by her rebuff. He turned to Vroman then, spoke in his pleasant way. "Ah, marshal, so you're back. And successful!" His glance flicked to Dave for an instant, then back to Vroman—looking across Dave as if he weren't there. "Congratulations, sir!"

"A little too early for that!" Vroman grunted.

"Yes, I suppose it is," Zeke agreed, pleasantly, his gaze going across to Concho. "After all, it's still a long ways back to Calico City."

"Are you goin' all the way?" Concho asked. "Makin' a rush trip, I take it!"

"Unexpected would be more accurate," Zeke Bodine laughed. "And to answer your question—I'm going all the way to Calico City. A client of mine there sent an urgent call for my assistance. Inconvenient right now, but maybe for the best. If there's anything I can do for you, Miss King, while you're there, I'll be most happy. I was your brother's friend, you know."

"Thank you!" she said, and this time didn't turn her face away. "Thank you, indeed, Mr. Bodine."

Silently, Dave damned the cashier for bringing Preston King's name continually into the talk, for making the ghost of the dead man come back to stand between Lola King and himself.

The cashier and the girl talked awhile, in low tones. Then the stage struck a long stretch of rough going, swaying and bumping violently, and the two stopped talking. Marshal Vroman fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and the jolting of the stage kept digging his gun deeper into Dave's ribs.

On and on through the darkness they went. Once, when they struck a patch of shallow sand, and the clatter was blotted

out, Dave thought he heard pounding hoofs behind. He looked over at the quiet shadow of Concho, but the little man made no sign. If they were being followed, then, it was not a part of Concho's plan, so Dave settled back as best he could, with the iron boot tugging at his benumbed foot.

IT WAS some time after midnight when they came to Vega creek, and the driver halted the team in the wide shallow stream to let them drink. Then, with only the faint purling of the water for sound, the hoofbeats could be plainly heard. Close and heavy. The others heard it, too. Zeke Bodine jerked upright, clutching tighter the valise that had almost slipped from his lap. Concho leaned forward, and something of their tension reached through the marshal's sleep. He came awake, all in an instant, his head alert to listen. The girl sat very still.

There was something ominous about those pounding hoofs. Zeke gave a muffled oath and reached for his gun. Above, on the box, they heard the guard's challenge ring out. Heard the answer—a bullet zinging through the night, so close that the whine of it sounded just outside the stagecoach window.

There were shouts. There was the crack of a whip, the frightened squeal of horses, then the stage floor bucked and lunged under their feet, as the startled team jerked the stage coach over the rock creek bed. "Get on the floor!" Dave yelled to Lola, frantically.

Lead sang all around the coach now, its ugly whine broken by a dull spat when a bullet splintered a panel. From beside the driver, the shotgun returned the fire of the unknown pursuers, but suddenly the gun dropped past the window . . . and then a dark shadow plummeting down after it.

Concho had stuck his head out the window, now he pulled in, yelled to the marshal, "It's Gyp Ragan and his gang."

"What they doin' here?" the marshal grated out as he pulled his feet up to make room for Lola on the floor. "Is he—?" His gun was drawn as he tried to look at Dave, at Concho, in the shadows.

"It's none of our doin's!" Concho yelled angrily. "And, mister, we need all of us! If you'll have Bodine throw out that valise and get his gun . . . and take those bracelets off Dave so he can fight."

Vroman hesitated a moment, then he fumbled in his pocket for the keys. He unlocked the handcuffs, then bent to free Dave's foot from the Oregon boot. "If I'm wrong," he grated out, "they still won't take you—alive!"

Dave stretched, flexed his cramped muscles. Zeke Bodine rasped out, "He's a criminal, a killer! You have no right—"

"It's goin' to take all hands . . . to protect the girl," Vroman rasped. "Yourself included. Get a gun, you!"

Concho was already climbing out of the window, gripping the baggage rail to draw himself to the top of the coach. Dave climbed to the other window. He'd taken one of Concho's guns. But he heard a groan, turned to see the marshal fall weakly back upon the seat, knocking Zeke Bodine's valise to the floor. The officer's hands dug into his middle, and Dave realized that it was plain and not a bullet that had laid the old man low.

"Take it easy!" Dave said, as he caught the marshal's rifle, and followed Concho to the coach top.

Up there, the two lay belly-flat behind a scant barricade of baggage, pouring their fire into the scattered ranks of the riders behind them.

When Concho's guns were empty, the driver handed him back a rifle from the boot, and the gambler went on firing. One pursuing horse dropped its head down, stumbled, then somersaulted a complete turn, landing atop its rider. And, as Dave and Concho fired together, two more saddles were emptied, the mounts swinging off from the rest. Seven were left to pursue.

The driver welled back, "Six miles to 'Dobe Wells . . . if you can hold out that long, and—" His voice broke off abruptly. Half turning to jam fresh shells into the magazine, Dave saw the man's head jerk back, while his body swayed on the high lurching seat. "Concho!" Dave barked. "Grab the ribbons!"

He took the hot rifle from Concho's hands and the little man scrambled forward to grasp the reins just as they slipped from the driver's nerveless fingers.

Gyp Ragan's gang was closing in. Ahead of the others, two riders were almost alongside the stage. A bullet whammed against the baggage rail by Dave's left ear. Bits of hot lead stung like mad hornets as Dave

swung his barrel to fire at those two flanking gunmen. One dropped at the second shot, and the other lagged back, but there was no let-up in the fire that raked the racing Concord.

Concho's panting voice came back. "Dave . . . at 'Dobe Wells . . . horses'll be waitin'. It's only a few miles to the . . . the hills from there!" Concho was using all his strength and wind to hold the bolting teams to the narrow trail. "Food in the saddle-bags. Guns. If . . . I . . . don't make it . . . you go ahead!"

From inside, Zeke Bodine's voice, hoarse with fear, rose loudly. "Get up, Marshal! For God's sake, do something!"

His cry was drowned in a staccato blast of rifle fire. Concho cracked the whip harder, sending the team on, heedless of winding turns or rough going. A bullet tore into Dave's left arm and when he tried to reload he found the arm useless. Hopefully, he dangled the gun over the side, even with the window. Maybe Bodine would have sense enough to know what he wanted. Sure enough . . . it was pulled from his grasp, taken inside the coach. He grabbed the other rifle, steadied the barrel over the rear baggage rail, firing swiftly until the pin snapped on an empty shell.

Gyp Ragan's bunch had been cut down to four, but that was four too many. Dave's left arm was numb and the warm stickiness of blood spread over the coach roof. He heard Lola King's voice: "Dave Lockhart! Dave!" and saw the stock of the reloaded rifle thrusting up from the coach window. She, instead of Zeke Bodine, had done what was needed.

"Be careful!" Dave's lips formed the words he knew she could not hear as he thrust down the empty weapon.

Firing one-armed from the swaying top of the racing stage, Dave saw that his lead was going wild. He heard a queer grunt, turned to see Concho swaying. "Concho!" he barked in alarm.

The little man caught himself. "I'll make it . . . to 'Dobe Wells. But you . . . no use firin', Dave . . . no chance. Drop off at the turn . . . catch a horse . . . hit for the hills. Your best chance, Dave . . ."

Dave lifted his head, stared. Yes, this was the perfect chance for the break. Just ahead was an abrupt turn. He could drop to the ground, lie low until Gyp Ragan's men had passed. Then it would be easy to catch one of the saddled mounts running loose, and he could make for the hills. He'd have time. Concho could report him as falling from the stage, probably dead. They'd make a long careful search for his dead body . . . and when they didn't find it along the trail, they'd search to find where he'd crawled off, wounded. Yes, there'd be plenty of time. . . .

Then he thought of Lola King, loading the rifle down there, and he thought of Gyp Ragan's greasy little eyes lighting upon the girl . . . and he stayed. As they passed the bend, Concho yelled again, "Give 'em hell, Dave! I see the lights ahead! Ten minutes . . . 'Dobe Wells!"

Dave steadied the rifle, aiming uncertainly at the nearest Ragan man. He felt weak, and the moonlight played tricks with his vision. He pulled the trigger, once, twice. The figure before the rifle's muzzle doubled up and fell. Dazedly he took the upthrust newly-loaded rifle, laid it down, pulled the trigger, mainly from instinct, because the blur was thick before his eyes now. He heard the animal-like cry some men give when they die.

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No, not two . . . for the hoofbeats suddenly stopped from behind them. The other two probably had no taste for venturing nearer 'Dobe Wells. Whatever prize they rode for wasn't worth it. Whatever prize. . . .

The last dark moment between consciousness and unconsciousness was suddenly lighted for Dave by a realization that made everything clear for a moment, as lightning will momentarily make everything stand out clearly in a dark world.

The prize they rode after had nothing to do with Dave, nor the marshal, nor the girl inside. So it must be Zeke Bodine. Zeke Bodine . . . and the satchel he clung to so carefully. Zeke Bodine, picked up at the cross-roads, this side of San Dimas. Zeke—cashier of the bank. Gyp Ragan's men, circling around, going down the alley, toward the bank. It had all the earmarks of a beautiful double-cross. Probably Zeke, pretending to work with Gyp Ragan, making things easy for a bank-robbery . . . but slipping out ahead of the robbery, with all the cash. He'd probably figured that Ragan's men would be caught and blamed for the robbery, and he'd have the cash. Instead, Gyp Ragan had somehow escaped, after finding the empty vault, and figured what had happened. He was after Zeke Bodine and the money, and it didn't matter if the rest of them were killed. . . .

Dave managed his last ounce of strength, called out over the edge, "Vroman . . . Bodine's valise . . ." and then the darkness caught up with him. He felt the sticky boards of the roof under his cheek. . . .

Dave was coming out of it when Concho brought the stage to a halt before the station at 'Dobe Wells. The station keeper stared at Concho. "Where's the regular driver?" he demanded.

Concho pointed to a pair of feet protruding from the coach's boot. "Had trouble with Gyp Ragan's gang," he explained as he weakly slid down.

Dave managed to get down, too, and Concho looked at him, then let his eyes drift to a pair of horses, all saddled and waiting. Dave shook his head slightly, while his good arm caught at his helpless left one. He still felt giddy, but he knew he was through with running away.

Concho smiled from a face as gray as Dave's. His shirt was soaked at the shoulder, and his hands were swollen from the unaccustomed pull of the reins.

"Get inside," the station-keeper ordered. "I'll call Doc!"

Dave wasn't quite ready. He turned, managed to open the stage door. Lola King came out quickly, stood looking at him. Her trim dress was all wrinkled and her bonnet off. The red hair was down about her shoulders and her face was smudged, but her brown eyes were clear and steady as she gazed at him. "Dave . . . Dave . . . the marshal told me about . . . about everything. I'm not giving any testimony, for I know my brother was talked into doing wrong things by—by that skunk there!" And she turned as Bodine came out of the stage. "He's really my brother's killer!"

Bodine's hands were empty—handcuffed. Behind him came Vroman, his face grim, the satchel in his hand. "It's full of money," Vroman said. "Bank's money. It was somehow tied in with the gang. . . ."

Dave nodded, told what he had guessed, and the marshal nodded. "It all dovetails," he said. "And we'll soon prove it. As for you, Dave—I heard Miss King say she wasn't givin' any testimony. In that case, there won't be much of a trial. And I'll do all I can for you, by tellin' how you behaved on this last trip. I think you saved our lives, Dave, because Gyp Ragan never left any witnesses against him. But now—"

The stationmaster broke in. "After Doc fixes these two men up, there'll still be time for a bite to eat at the lunch room."

Suddenly, Dave found himself hungry. He said heartily, looking at Lola, "I could sure enjoy a good meal—in good company!"

She smiled, and it was like a promise. Everything was suddenly bright about them. Even Vroman. "By cracky's, I can eat, too!" he exclaimed. "Seems like losin' the strain of havin' to take you back to be hanged, Dave, has taken that hot gnawin' away. Order me a big bowl of soup, Miss King, while I put this slicker in jail!"

Lola gathered up her skirts and started for the lunchroom, and Dave realized that he hadn't told her what to order for him. But it didn't matter. He was as good as free. The world was right.

Killer of the Frozen Sedges

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Hak struck ferociously as the duck took to the air.

Hak, vicious, gray killer-king of the frozen north, heard the man-creature's ax burst the house of his muskrat-victim, and turned to fight, with talon and fang, for his last right to rule the savage, frozen sedgelands!

HAK, the king weasel, ran with the silent speed of a shadow through the thicket, directed by his keen sense of smell to his prey, a foolhen grouse.

Hak was a king in his own domain, the sire of many flash killers, creatures which,

as winter came, were hunted vigorously by man for their white ermine coats with the long, black-tipped tails.

Hak whipped about the base of a spruce tree on whose lowest limb the foolhen roosted. The king weasel was in no special hurry. He rolled his serpentine-like body with grace over a protruding, moss-covered root and cavorted about before he glided up the tree bole and out along the limb to strike with his deadly, knife-sharp fangs.

For a few brief moments the grouse fluttered. Hak's swift and his fierce eyes flashed as he began to suck the warm blood so pleasing to his palate.

But hungry as he was, he did not on this occasion drink his fill. Back at her den in the slide rock of an old draw was Chee, Hak's mate, unable to hunt for the time being, due to an injury. Not always did Hak carry slain game home to her, but this evening he took a firm hold on the plump bird and with prodigious strength for one so slender, carried it back to the den, there to lay it down and chatter shrilly.

Chee came out baring her fangs. Not long ago, shortly after the birth of her young, she had narrowly escaped death at the fangs of a bigger member of her species—a fisher. She was hurt and sour of temper and Hak wisely backed off to whirl and seek other game trails—perhaps a red squirrel, or a snowshoe rabbit. Once Hak took a hot, fresh trail, none of his prey could escape him; but when himself hunted, he could hide like a flash of light darting behind a cloud. He glided between roots or rocks with greater skill than even the little chipmunk. . . .

Hak had whetted his appetite for blood tonight and his jaws champed fiercely as his facial expression became a mask of terror. He paused now and then, a forepaw raised, his deadly mesmeric eyes shooting their green-red barbs as he weaved his snake-like head and neck searching wind for some inviting prey.

He suddenly puffed, a series of gasped hisses as he caught the scent of man, and of the creatures which lived at the wild homestead of the man creature. There were great feathered creatures there, bigger than the grouse and ducks of the wild places.

As if swift decision were reached, Hak clacked his teeth and hurried forward, headed for the home yard of the first homestead settler in all the upper Smoky River country.

Hak was one of the few hinterland predators whose respect for man was masked by sheer contempt. When his fur was white, he of course felt deeper respect but now his contempt governed his audacity. He had the ability to bob, weave, hide even where a chipmunk might find difficulty and seldom did he expose himself long enough to present a target. . . . It is true many of his kind were trapped, but it was their greed which brought them to their end in the steel jaws—greed at the inviting tang of mixed baits the Indians and white trappers used.

Hak struck a hogpen and snuffled the distasteful tang from his sensitive nostrils. He padded delicately over the caked mud of wallows. Now at last at the log chicken house he began his swift tour of exploration, running along the top of the bulging base logs, on four sides of the rambling structure, as he scouted for some break, some small opening in the chinking.

His eyes flashed savagely as he champed his strong-muscled jaws. The tang of the poultry scent was warmly inviting, compelling, yet he had discovered no means of entrance.

But though his skull was small, Hak's brain was very sharp and capable of swift and accurate direction.

Shortly his teeth were at work cutting away the caked mud of the chinking between two lower logs. Now he clacked his teeth and made a soft sound not heard more than a foot or so away. At the junction of an end and side base log there was a gap in the wood chinking from whose surface he had cut away the mud—a gap of only an inch or so.

With the ease and sinuous grace of a garter snake, Hak writhed his slender form through the aperture. . . . Inside the shack he poised himself for a moment or so, head weaving, eyes spilling their twin jets of flame as he swept the filled roosts with lustful glances. Then swiftly, silently he went about his deathly mission.

A rooster squawked, but swiftly toppled, Hak clinging tightly to his neck.

Hak had cut a main vessel and drank. But not until he had tasted the blood of three more of the feathered ones did he

cease his ruthless plunder, and whirl away. Pandemonium now reigned at the henhouse. Old hens flapped their wings as they smacked against the log wall or against each other in their fright, but Hak disregarded them. His night's feasting was done.

All at once, his every keen sense alert, he whipped his body about. There came the sound of heavy man-made footfalls and the creak of the old slab door of the shack. Suddenly Hak lost all his contempt for the man creature.

His belly was well filled, too well filled to attempt to snake through the small chink opening to escape. As he heard the thick voice sounds of the man creature, Hak realized he was trapped, but with amazing cunning he scampered over to hide flat against the far sloping wall of a slab feed trough. There he lay breathing sharply, but silently as the man creature, carrying a lighted stable lantern, searched for the plunderer.

The booming man voice sounds struck Hak's ears like muffled thunder. Suddenly the man, Cart Foley, shone his lantern's light on the tell-tale cut in the chinking.

"Sneakin' damned big weasel!" he swore explosively.

The man whirled and Hak heard the receding footfalls as Foley moved out of the shack to search for materials with which to repair the opening in the chinking.

In this short respite, the king weasel darted from behind his feed trough hide-out, to go streaking toward the door which was open a crack. Out in the deepening night he sped across the barnyard, coming within a few feet of the still growling man creature.

Hak's belly was filled, his blood lust for the night satiated. . . . His mate was fed and, chunnering softly, he rolled his beautiful form in the dew-moistened grass, washing himself with meticulous care. After a sharp run along the rim of a dry draw he suddenly halted at his own favorite hideout bedground where in comfort he coiled himself to rest—his keen, sharp nose stuck into wind. While he slept his every sense, every instinct seemed alert for there were many cunning enemies in the wilds—enemies as ruthless as he. He, too, was alert for alarm calls from his mate. At her first screech of warning he would whip to action, or to scout. Hak was cautious, extremely cautious and because of this he was the biggest, the oldest weasel in all the upper Smoky country.

HAK BLINKED his bright little eyes in the sunlight as he reared and weaved his head over the top of a rock. Chee had crawled from her den bringing to the daylight for their first visit her seven younglings, now seven weeks old. Their education would commence at once. Chee was slender, a beautiful creature much smaller than the great Hak. She semed wholly to have recovered from her injuries and now writhed her long neck, turning her head to "croo-oo" softly to her timorous youngsters. When suddenly she glimpsed the big swashbuckler, Hak, she spat and hissed. No longer did she consider his help necessary. But Hak puffed his own cheeks and screeched. This was his domain. Chee had remained here on sufferance only, and not even the fact that in Chee lay a potential mate of the future mating moon prevented Hak from snaking toward her. He was no respecter of sex.

The gallant little Chee rose, clacking her teeth, hissing screeches which had had some effect during her incapacitation while injured and nursing her young, but Hak rushed her and but for her lightning speed, her shoulder might easily have been laid open.

It was during this wild altercation that a large brown hawk banked high above to catch an opportunity to strike down at those seven squirming young creatures below. He folded his wings partly and spilled altitude with meteoric speed. As he neared his target his great talons opened, but all at once, the chocolate-brown body of little Chee flashed. She had coiled and stretched like a striking snake. The talons of Roak, the hawk closed, but they closed on Chee's haunches.

Hissing, Hak leaped, but too late. The hawk, carrying Chee, zoomed . . . Little Chee stretched upward and screeched her curses, expressive of both anger and fear. Now her head darted as she struck the feathered body with her fangs.

Many feet above the ground a double killing was enacted before the flashing eyes of Hak. Chee's fangs completed their deadly work a split second before the death grip of Roak's talons squeezed the last of life

from her taut little body, then they fell."

Hak snuffled. He whipped about—weaving, bobbing like a human shadow boxer, running in all directions, it seemed, at once, and returning in swift flashes to poise himself on a piece of slab rock to glare at the squirming youngsters. He lifted his head to screech venomously at the still planning hawk, as if to curse Roak for having thrust these squirming responsibilities on to him. . . .

Thus began for Hak, as the summer waned and autumn tints splashed the rugged back country, a period of intensified exertion. He had already, however unintentionally, slain one of his young. Early after the loss of their mother, the young ones scampered along in the trails of their sire, often touching off warnings to the game he stalked. Hak had whipped about repeatedly to warn them, but when one, the biggest of the females, bared her teeth and rushed, Hak had to defend himself and in so doing, his fangs cut deeper than he intended.

Now Hak ran the creek banks and dry washes—scouting, sliding, gliding. He struck the lake's sedges and took his toll of young muskrats, whipping like a streak out of range of danger when the parent rats converged on him.

Hak ran the willow-studded meadows and wrought havoc among the nestling field mice and in the deeper thickets struck sharply at the snowshoe rabbit families. . . . Always he killed even far more than was his custom—leaving much game for his following youngsters to tap.

Twice he had come within a toe tip of springing traps set by his arch enemy the homesteader man at the barnyard in the vicinity of the chicken shack from which there now came the most tantalizing scent of growing broilers, the hatchlings of the season.

Hak struck the jackpine country, whisking up tree boles, to glide along limbs and pounce upon unwary oldster squirrels.

It was on such an excursion, in the heights of a tall pine, that Hak came closest to meeting his death.

He slid silently along a tree limb, more than fifty feet above the ground. Hungry, thirsty for the blood of his quarry, a fat red squirrel, he moved closer, closer.

The big squirrel had lived a full lifetime of action in the woods. He slept with all senses alert and when suddenly he tanged the sharp musk scent of Hak, the killer, he whipped to poise himself for a leap to the next neighboring tree, but there was not time. Instead, as Hak struck, Scree-hee, the squirrel, swung and his discolored incisors, deadly sharp, clacked as he reared into defensive position.

Hak flattened out on the limb, his head bobbing and weaving to demoralize the squirrel with the fierce flashes of flame from his eyes.

It was then, from the upper fronds of the pine the great wings of Ah-hoo the horned owl, went into action. Ah-hoo, a fierce killer in his own right, had waited with great patience as he watched the stalking weasel and now there was left to him the choice of targets, for Scree-hee had elected to make a stand.

Despite his great wingspread Ah-hoo struck with amazing speed, accuracy and maneuverability. He struck at Hak, as if Hak, the killer, presented a stiffer challenge to his own hunting activities.

Like a streak the lithe form of the weasel whipped about. Scree-hee, the squirrel had turned and as if to emulate the flying, parachuting action of his cousin, the flying squirrel, he leaped out for the limb of the nearest tree.

A sharp talon drove through Hak's skin at the haunches, but wily, the little killer whipped free and hissed as he struck sharply upward. But his fangs snapped only on loose feathers. He struck again and a single fang slashed one of Ah-hoo's eyes, tearing it almost from its socket.

The great feathered killer gasped in his pent up savagery. His remaining eye spilled angry flame as he struck, but Hak had whirled and like striking lightning streaked down the tree's bole to the ground.

Below, the king weasel stretched his neck and his glinting eyes conned the heights where there was much flapping of great wings. . . . Hak had defied, cheated death, and in so doing had quickened his desire to effect a kill.

Foam gathered at his champing jaws, then all at once he became calm, with the tang of Scree-hee's scent still strong in his nostrils.

Whipping himself through a patch of grass, Hak squirmed and rolled, as if to

cleanse his body of all possible tang of musk he had exuded in battle. Satisfied with his ablutions he snaked along to the secondary pine and climbed. Bobbing in behind a hard, gummy birl he lay flattened a moment or so, then suddenly sprang and with unerring aim stabbed his quarry in the nape of the neck.

Hak's hind claws dug deep into the bark of the tree limb as the heavy squirrel squirmed momentarily. When Hak had drunk his fill he licked his chops as the limp form of his kill toppled to the ground, there to be fought over by the six younglings of Chee which had again picked up their sire's trail. . . .

HAK reveled in the sharpening autumn weather when the big flocks of ducks, waveys, honkers and other water fowl came down on the lake and the sedges. He slipped silently through the slough grass in the lake meadows, then onto the sedges where occasionally fat mallards, or young waveys fed.

Here was the big game hunting of his life and in the late twilight he hopped from one tuft to another, tufts growing hoary with white frost, and he purred softly as he tanged the scent of warm blood.

But Hak was not destined to make a big feathered kill tonight. Had Chee lived, the broodlings would have received their proper education: they would not have blundered on through the sedges as they did this evening.

They would have been taught to make use of every fold of ground, every tule clump, every tuft of slobby sod. But ravenously hungry, their primary instinct alone served them—the desire to rush to a kill.

Hak knew how to control his scent glands when necessary. Often loosely cast musk was a give away, not to the feathered ones, but to the alert muskrats whose houses dotted the sedgeland.

As the king weasel stalked expertly a handsome young wavey, there sounded the sudden plop of a diving muskrat. It was the alarm, coming almost as Hak stretched to strike down his big prey. The wavey rose, flapping as six whitening weasel forms flashed by their angry sire to find the hunting ground empty.

Eyes flashing, Hak puffed and hissed. He screeched bitterly in his rising anger. By all rights, the young ones should, ere this, have scattered, each to find for himself an individual hunting ground. Instead, they continued as a group to haunt the trails of their hunting father.

Now flashing eyes met flashing eyes as a big pugnacious male, almost as big as Hak himself, returned Hak's curses and counter challenged. He came weaving in. He had Hak's style— the long neck stretched and weaving; the head bobbing up and down and from side to side as if each attempted with those deadly eye lamps to mesmerize the other.

Suddenly he struck. Hak scarcely seemed to move as like the wink of a firefly he whipped out of range, to coil his spring-steel neck and strike back. . . .

Then followed a fierce battle at the sedgeland—as grim and dramatic a battle as if fought by silvertips, when two lightning-like killers, perhaps the flashiest killers in all the hinterland, whisked through their amazingly fast-action battle maneuvers when only their speed saved each from speedy death.

Hak blew sharply. Not in many years had he engaged in such a battle. His last such battle had been against a big old female with years of fighting experience behind her. She had been difficult, but here in his fighting son, Hak had found an opponent which, if not now quickly slain, was destined to become the king of all the upper Smoky country.

Hak changed his fighting tactics. He feinted more, exercising all his strategy as parried and bobbed, always sure of good footing. He was teaching his son a sharp lesson in fighting, boxing, but in his great wisdom, Hak was slyly drawing the big youngster into softer sedgeland, bad footing where the more solid tufts were less frequent. He was taunting the young heller, drawing him into flashy strikes, only to nip back again and again on to a tuft.

Suddenly the killer king seemed to buckle at the haunches, half toppling from his solid tuft of sod. In that split second, hissing sharply, proudly, Hak's big son stretched. His fangs were bared as he struck, but Hak's timing had been perfectly planned. Almost as the young one's fang tips touched his pelt, he rolled and the audacious youngster toppled into the muck. It was then Hak screeched his climactic battle cry, a

screech which caused the remaining members of the brood to cringe as they stood by. The killer weasel whipped his head about and struck and there was no error of timing. . . .

But Hak was not to enjoy the fruits of his battle engagement. Came warning hisses from a near by young female, then the heavy slosh of a man creature's footfalls.

Before Hak's fangs had severed an artery in his son's neck, he spun, as he caught the sharp scent of the homesteader man.

Cart Foley grinned savagely as he squeezed the trigger of his old ten gauge shotgun to blast Hak's son with heavy shot . . . He grinned with gloating, as his lips moved.

"You'll kill no more uh my fowl," he said thickly. "You was too wise to be trapped, but somehow I always figured to one day catch up with you . . ."

But at Foley's back, his eyes flashing their deathly headlights in the cover of a tule clump, Hak bobbed and weaved as he watched the man creature stride off along the sedges, then turn inshore, having sent all the ducks flapping farther out on the lake with his blasting thunder.

Snuffling the hated man scent from his nose, Hak raised a forepaw, glared about him, then darted on inshore to scout for his night's supply of blood elsewhere . . . His majesty had been challenged, but he had retained the right to proclaim himself still the king of all the weasel kind in forest and gulch, and throughout the balance of the fall season he would give the man creature's barnyard a wide berth, concentrating his hunting on the nests of the field mice—catching the scurrying ground squirrels busy at the last of their harvesting. No creature among them all, in all the hinterland, worked so fiercely, so vigorously as Hak himself . . . No creature hunted with more audacious fearlessness, nor with greater courage.

THE SNOW time was the most deadly time for Hak and his kind. Though their coats were now ermine white, their tracks on the snow's surface gave them away. Nightly, Hak scampered along the draws and gulleys, writhing through the smallest apertures in labyrinths of windfall logs and limbs—seeking out the denned mice and ground squirrels. His body seemed leaner, longer, but it had acquired more power of muscle and more beauty and maneuverability.

Food became scarcer and in time Hak began to raid the trapline of the man creature. At the close of night, just before the fitful crack of pale dawn, Hak was coursing around the lake, sniffing at muskrat feeding and breathing hummocks, or houses. He seemed to know the method by which the homesteader trapped the muskrats.

A chunk of the frozen dome of a house was cut out, to expose the upper chamber of the rats. It was on these ledges that the traps were set. . . . It was at these loosened clods that Hak's fangs worked until he had cut or drilled a hole by which he could enter.

This very early morning while overhead Yeepek, the great bald eagle already planed, Hak was ready to enter a mid-lake house. He could scent a trapped rat within and when finally he stuck in his snakelike head and flashed his terrible eyes, the muskrat squealed. Several times Hak's size, the rat cringed with fear. But the muskrat had great cutting incisors of his own and in the extremity of fear as that terrible head struck toward him, he snapped his cutters, but like lightning Hak ducked under to come up striking deep into the furry throat.

Hak gave out a gurgling sound of ecstasy as he tasted the warm blood of his victim. Nature had so fashioned him. He killed fiercely and enjoyed his blood. He struck sharply at the pest rodents about the homestead of the man creature, but never was man inclined to measure the worth of such as Hak against the losses of poultry stock. When the bobbing head of Hak appeared, man struck with club or gun, or in winter when the handsome white pelts had value, he struck the weasel runs with his steel traps.

As Hak sucked in the blood of his victim, he suddenly squirmed to shift position and was suddenly startled by a loud metallic snap and then as his heart beat thumped in terrifically increased tempo, he realized that he was himself caught—caught by two claws of a hind paw in a secondary steel trap. . . . The man, a wise trapper had purposely laid two traps in the bigger houses, hoping to catch the big weasel, the

killer of his poultry and the destroyer of many of his trapped fur-bearers.

In mounting savagery, Hak hurled himself at full length in fierce efforts to snatch his claws free. He whirled to bite at his trapped claw roots, then again whipped himself into action which had the claws almost wrenched from their sockets when all at once he paused, cocking his reared head as he caught the steady crunch-crunch sound of approaching man.

This was Hak's greatest moment of terror and his every nerve fibre quivered, but now he reared his head and his terrible eyes flashed their lamps at the sound of a handaxe cutting through the dome of the muskrat's house. . . . It sounded in Hak's eardrums like distant, muffled thunder.

In a furious demonstration of activity, the little big killer hurled himself about the chamber. One toe was worn loose, but the other clung by a thin shred of sinew as the man creature opened the lodge dome to let in the first pale light of dawn.

Cart Foley gasped and stepped backward a pace. The inside of the house was gloomy and he plainly saw the flash of those terrible eyes. It was a moment or so before he could collect his wits, believe his own eyes. Now he chuckled thickly. He had at last caught up with the great Hak. . . . He should have observed the tracks leading to this particular muskrat house. Now had come the chance to squeeze the life from the killer—squeeze it with mittened fingers so that the beautiful pelt would in no way be marred.

A lightly-mittened hand shot forward, but more swiftly, almost as swiftly as the flashing lights from his eyes, Hak whirled his head and struck. He puffed a sharp hiss as his fangs struck.

The man creature howled as he snatched back his hand, almost dragging weasel, trap, and drag stick clear of the house.

It was this act which gave Hak his chance. He felt his second claw sinew give. He was free and before the man could recover, Hak stretched himself in one superb long leap which flashed his white body within inches of his enemy's face. Pain was nothing to him. As he ran, the cooling snow quickly plugged the sockets from which his toes had been torn. . . . At his back, mouthing thick curses, the man creature was busy rendering first aid to his own wounds, by packing his right thumb with snow.

There had been times when harvesting his first meager acreage of oats when he had exposed a field mice nest beneath a stook, that the small mother mouse had reared to clack her teeth at him. . . . He had quickly disposed of her with a swipe of his pitching fork. . . . Cart Foley had yet much to learn. . . . His lessons had come sharply, however much they inflamed his bitterness toward Hak and his kind.

Before the pale gray dawn light attempted to thrust its way fitfully, hesitantly through the pall of the frost fog, Hak had begun his grim practice of surgery.

Pandemonium once again reigned at the poultry house. It was Cart Foley's wife who first awakened at the raucous squawks of her chickens. Quickly she aroused her husband, who reluctantly dressed himself.

"Skunk, Cart!" Mrs. Foley said sharply.

Foley grunted as he took down his gun. He did not bother with a lantern tonight. He would, with his old ten gauge, blast at any furbearing marauder that moved.

But this night, Hak had wisely dug for himself a large aperture in the chinking. His lust for blood tapping was done and at the first sounds of heavy crunching footfalls, he slid to the corner of the shack, his sharp head near the escape hole.

As the slab door creaked open, Hak's eyes flashed. There was a terrible crash of thunder and the sound of splintering wood, all blended with the frenzied squawking of hens. . . . But long before the Number Four shot riddled the log walls and chinking, Hak was streaking clear in the open, scampering across the smelly hogpen run. His work was done and in his own terrible way he had exacted a heavy price for his two lost toes. . . .

Back at his bedground area, he coiled himself to rest, while in his belly there lay a great comforting warmth. He could now go along for two or three days on scant rations before again attempting to launch himself at a big kill.

Grunting contentedly, he whipped his beautiful tail up around the top of his moist nose for protection and the great Hak, king of all the weasels, slept, to snore in utter contempt of all creatures of the wilds.

SIX BULLETS FROM BOOTHILL

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

"I ain't one to beat about the bush," allowed Salty Bryce. "This is my town and my valley. And I just don't like your kind stinking the place up. Savvy, Tinstar?" The gunslick marshal savvied, all right. . . . Secure in the knowledge that his bloodstained reign was backed by more cold-deck killers than Salty Bryce could ever hope to chouse into their boothill corral!

CHAPTER ONE

Greeting Card in Lead

IT WAS almost dark, but even in the the thin light Salty Bryce could see the change that had come to Antlers. He'd left it four years ago, a gawky seventeen-year-old kid, and he'd pictured the town exactly as he'd left it; a few false-fronted business buildings, the schoolhouse where he'd put in eight years fighting to prove he wasn't going to get kicked around like a stray pup because he was an orphan and slept in the back room of a saloon, the church, the scattering of houses ranging from Jeff Howison's mansion to tar paper shacks.

Now, with the dark peaks of the Cascades

Salty's gun barked an instant before the hardcase marshal pulled trigger.

thrusting their irregular spine against the sky, Salty stood at the end of the depot while the train clicked past, the whistle coming back to him in shrill farewell. That was one change. When he'd left the country a railroad for Central Oregon was nothing more than talk.

Now, with the twin ribbons of steel stretching away on both sides of him until they were lost in the dusk, Salty saw that the railroad had brought a metamorphosis to Antlers. Dozens of lights had come to life before him. It must be quite a town, he thought.

"That you, Salty?"

It was a vaguely familiar voice coming from the shadow of a box car beyond the station. Salty made a half turn so that the movement of his right hand dropping to Colt butt would not be seen by the man who had called. He answered guardedly, "I'm Salty."

There was nothing more from the other for a moment. Salty didn't like it. Jeff Howison's letter had hinted at trouble, but whether it referred to the manner of Dodge Kelly's death or whether it was merely the trouble that comes to any tiny cow town which suddenly bursts at the seams was a question Howison hadn't answered.

"This is Pete Schafer," the man said. "Come over here. I don't want to be seen."

Schafer was a gambler who had played in Dodge's Cascade Bar. A square gent, old Dodge had said, but Salty, with youth's intolerance, had voiced his doubts.

For a moment Salty stood in indecision. Schafer was afraid of something, so thoroughly scared that he might give Salty a slug in the back if he walked off. So he did the only thing he could. He said, "All right, Pete," and moved casually toward the box car.

Schafer stood around the corner of the car. Salty couldn't see him clearly, but he seemed to be the slender carefully-groomed figure he had been four years ago, his mustache a thin smudge across his upper lip. He held out a soft-palmed hand. "Mighty glad to see you, son. I haven't slept for a week thinking I might miss you."

Salty gave the gambler's hand a quick shake and dropped it, not liking its feel. He'd worked hard for a slim living when he was a kid. Before he'd left he'd buckarooed for Howison's Rafter H outfit, and since then he'd ridden for a dozen spreads from Montana to the San Miguel country in Colorado. Somewhere along the line he'd picked up a violent dislike for anybody who lived by his wits and fingers.

"I ain't one to lose sleep over," Salty said a little testily.

"It wasn't just you. It was on account of Dodge. I owe him plenty. Bad luck or good, he always saw I never starved. I think he had a notion what he was in for because he made me promise to side you when you came back. That was the day he got killed."

"Killed!" Salty's hand gripped Schafer's arm. "Howison wrote that Dodge was dead, but he didn't say he was killed."

"Jeff Howison is the biggest crook this side of hell," the gambler said darkly. "Don't let his fine talk fool you. I think he killed Dodge and sent for you so he could kill you. That's why I've been meeting every train since Dodge died. I knew Howison would send for you because I'd read Dodge's will."

"What's the will got to do with it?"

Schafer swore. "Didn't Howison tell you? Hell, boy, you own the Cascade Bar, and it's worth a fortune."

Salty laughed. The idea of him owning a saloon was funny, Salty Bryce who had never had more than fifty dollars in his pocket. It was even funnier to think of the old Cascade Bar being worth a fortune. Dodge Kelly had made a living out of it and little more.

"I guess you're hoorawing me, Pete."

"The hell I am. This ain't the Antlers you left, Salty. An irrigation system is going in that'll water a hundred thousand acres. Settlers are pouring in every day."

"Even if the Cascade Bar is doing a land office business, it don't make it worth a fortune."

"I don't want them to know I met you, so I've got to get back. Here's the story in a few words. Preacher Marvel and Jeff Howison and the rest who don't want the town sprouting out from under them passed an ordinance last year providing that there would be only one saloon license issued. They set the price at a thousand dollars. Dodge yapped his head off, but it didn't do any good. That means you own the only saloon in town. With hundreds of men digging ditches all over the country and the

number of settlers we've got, the Cascade Bar is a mint."

It was almost dark now, so dark Salty couldn't see the expression on the man's face, but he sensed Schafer was talking straight.

"Who's this you don't want to know about meeting me?"

Schafer hesitated before he said, "Howison. I hope you're tough enough to hang rattle for a while. If you aren't, sell me the Cascade Bar and catch the northbound train in the morning."

Anger rushed through Salty in a red blinding wave. Schafer wanted it to sound as if he were talking straight. All the time he was maneuvering to get his hands on the Cascade Bar.

Necessity had taught Salty Bryce the use of his fists and gun, and to figure the odds when the chips were down. It hadn't taught him to control his temper. He lashed out at Schafer now, a hard-knuckled fist crashing against the gambler's chin and knocking him flat on his back in the cinders.

Salty wheeled and stalked toward the station. Chances are Pete Schafer had never done a day's work in his life. He'd lived by his wits and the deftness of his hands, but he'd never been a big operator. Salty remembered how he used to stand at the bar with one of Dodge Kelly's free drinks in his hand, and hold forth on some big idea he'd dreamed up the night before, but his ideas never worked. Now he'd dreamed up another and he'd pegged Salty for the kind of sucker he could booger into taking his offer.

THE GUN roared just as Salty rounded the end of the station and was silhouetted against a lamp-bright window. The shot was almost good enough. It drilled a neat hole through the top of Salty's Stetson, missing his head by the thickness of a razor blade, and ripped through the window.

A man inside cried out as Salty hit the cinders and rolled out of the light. Then Pete Schafer opened up from the box car. The ambusher pounded away through the sagebrush. Salty drew his gun and emptied it at the sound, knowing it was a waste of powder.

"Who's out there?" the telegrapher yelled.

Schafer raced around the station. "Get moving, you fool," he whispered. "Crow Rountree and the whole damned town will be here to see what's going on."

Salty moved without further deliberation, Schafer a step ahead. That slug had been too close. Somebody, and it wasn't Pete Schafer, was playing for keeps. They were in the sagebrush with the darkness all around them before they stopped.

"You always were a brash young fool," Schafer said darkly. "Plumb handy with your fists. I don't like getting cracked on the chin no better than the next one. I won't forget it, but I'm still playing on your side because of the promise I gave Dodge. Only don't swing on me again."

"I'm sorry," Salty said in a rush of regret. "I figgered you were feeding me a bunch of hogwash so you could buy the Cascade Bar yourself."

"I'd like to have it," Schafer said frankly. "I'll pay you a good price, and you'd be smart to sell. I don't reckon you've got a friend in the county. Maybe you can remember you got around to licking all the kids in town and half the men before you pulled out."

"I remember," Salty murmured. "How was Dodge killed?"

"Had a bad bump on his head. Looked as if he'd fallen down and hit himself on something sharp, like maybe the corner of his desk. He'd been drinking pretty hard that night, and Rountree called it an accident. I don't think so."

"Dodge never drank enough to fall down and crack his head."

"He'd done a good deal of drinking the last year. He didn't get along with Rountree."

"Who's Rountree?"

"The town marshal," Schafer said bitterly. "A gunslick killer that Howison and Preacher Marvel and the rest of the town council brought in when the company started work on the ditch." The gambler laid a hand on Salty's arm. "Kid, you haven't changed a bit or you wouldn't have taken that crack at me without knowing what had happened. You won't last twenty-four hours. Sell out to me and take the morning train. I tell you that you haven't got a friend in town. I heard plenty of talk when the news got out that Dodge had willed the saloon to you."

"I've got one friend," Salty said.

"Thanks for siding me, Pete. I reckon I'll hang on and rattle."

Turning from the gambler, Salty moved through the sagebrush until he reached the street. He wondered how much Ann Marvel had changed, and if she'd remember the signal they'd used as kids.

THE PREACHER'S house was a small white cottage beside the church. Salty had stood behind it dozens of times and whistled one long and two short blasts. If it was possible for Ann to get out of the house, she would move the lamp that set in a bracket on the kitchen wall. If it didn't move, Salty slipped away, for he knew the preacher was in the house, and Preacher Marvel had long said he didn't want any boy who'd grown up in a saloon hanging around his daughter.

Salty circled the woodshed and came to stand in its shadow behind the cottage. The shades were up, the lamplight cutting squarely across Preacher Marvel's craggy face. He was a big-boned awkward man who hewed to the line as he saw it, and who never stooped to pick the chips up if they fell where he or his daughter would stumble over them. It was this uncompromising character which had made Salty hate him, for he had loved Ann as long as he could remember. He knew Preacher Marvel too well to hope he'd change.

Something swelled up in Salty's throat when Ann turned so that he could see her face. She hadn't changed; the same eager blue eyes, the bright brown hair that was almost red in the lamplight. No, she hadn't changed at all except that the years had brought the full maturity of womanhood to her slim figure.

Bitterness rushed through Salty Bryce then. He stood here like an outcast, waiting for Preacher Marvel to leave the house. He couldn't come to the front door and knock and ask to see the girl he loved the way any other man in Antlers would, the way he would have done in another town.

He'd written to Ann, sent her presents at Christmas, but he hadn't heard from her. Not once. That thought soured the memory of the last minutes he'd spent with her when he'd held her in his arms and kissed her and she had said she loved him.

They finished eating and Preacher Marvel picked up his hat. He said something to Ann and left the kitchen. A moment later Salty heard his heavy footfalls on the boardwalk die as he strode toward town.

Salty whistled the signal. Ann was stacking the dishes beside the sink. She straightened when she heard the first long blast. Before the second shot one had left his lips, she had spun away from the sink, flung open the back door and was racing across the yard to him.

"Salty," she cried, and she was in his arms her face upturned for his kiss.

Her kiss roused him and shocked him and swept away the bitterness that the years of silence had brought. Then she drew her lips from his and clung to him, her head on his chest. He heard her say, "It's been so long, Salty," and felt her tremble.

She loved him. She'd always love him. He couldn't doubt her now. A woman like Ann Marvel would not give her lips to any man the way she had given hers to him unless she loved him. Still the hurt rankled, and he could not keep from saying accusingly, "I didn't know whether you'd got married or not. You never wrote."

She drew back from him, her lifted face a pale oval in the starlight. "There was never a moment when I didn't think of you and wonder where you were and if you still loved me."

"Why didn't you write that to me?" he asked roughly.

"Dad made me promise I wouldn't write."

"I ought to kill him." It had always been that way, this Preacher Marvel who acted as if he held the one key to heaven. More than any other person in Antlers, the preacher had condemned the orphan kid who slept in the saloon's back room to eternal damnation. Salty Bryce had never been one to spend his passion hating others, but now he hated Marvel in a way he had never hated another human being.

Ann stiffened and pulled away from him. "Try to understand. You were a boy when you left, and sometimes a boy forgets his promises. Dad said that if you came back, still loving me, and you'd settle down and hold a regular job, he'd marry us himself."

It took a moment for his mind to grip all she had said and to understand. Hating the preacher as he did, he still had to admit the wisdom of what Ann had said. He pulled

her back against him and kissed her again.

"I'm here," Salty shouted. "Let's go find your dad and have him marry us tonight."

"You wouldn't hurry a girl, would you?" she murmured.

"You bet I would."

"Not tonight, Salty. I've got a question to ask. Did you come back for me?"

"Sure," he said quickly. "All the way from Colorado, and I'm not just a busted buckaroo. I own the Cascade Bar and Pete Schafer says it's a mint. I can support you in style. We'll have a house like Jeff Howison's."

"Salty," she cried in shock. "Was it me that brought you back, or the saloon?"

"Why, Howison wrote me Dodge had died and I was supposed to get here as fast as I could, but I didn't know about the saloon being mine till Pete Schafer met me at the depot."

She was ramrod straight in his arms, suddenly distant and cool. "I think I've always loved you, even when we were children. You knew what was right and wrong better than some of the others who were raised in our best homes. I couldn't understand it then, but I do now. You got your ideals from Dodge Kelly."

"I reckon I did. He was a better man than some of your psalm-singers. I don't see anything wrong in owning a saloon."

She was silent a moment before she said. "Dodge was a good man, Salty. Dad understands that now. He's softened a lot lately because he's in trouble. Perhaps that's the Lord's way of humbling those who feel their own importance."

For Preacher Marvel to be softened or to be in trouble was beyond Salty's understanding. He asked incredulously, "What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. He won't tell me, but I can see how much he worries. Maybe I'm just imagining it, but I think it's Jeff Howison."

"But how could Jeff . . ."

"I don't know, but Dad needs help, Salty." She clung to him now, gripping his arms fiercely as if afraid she would lose him. "Don't go away again without taking me. Or stay here, Salty. Make people know you as I know you."

"I didn't figger on pulling out right away. We'll get married the first day you say."

"But Salty, don't you see? I can't marry a saloon owner. I've got to think of Dad, and if we have children. . . ."

"You just got done telling me Dodge was a good man," Salty said hotly.

"But he wasn't my husband."

Pete Schafer had said the Cascade Bar was worth a fortune. There had been these few minutes when Salty had seen himself a wealthy man, a man respected as Dodge Kelly had been respected. Now, looking ahead, he saw that the years would be barren years, without love, without hope, the same kind of years that lay behind. He wanted no more of that kind of living, and Ann Marvel would make the difference.

"All right," he said heavily. "Pete Schafer wants to buy the Cascade Bar. I'll sell it to him."

She said no word, but her kiss was enough to tell him how she felt. Then she whispered, "They're having a council meeting tonight. I think you should go and tell them what you're doing."

"All right."

"And Salty, will you help Dad, whatever it is?"

"He'd laugh in my face if I offered to help him."

"You're wrong, Salty. I know how much Dad's changed."

Salty Bryce grinned in the darkness. He was as tough as a bootheel. He prided himself on that toughness, but he wasn't tough at all when it came to Ann Marvel. He'd do anything she asked, and he always would.

"Sure, honey," he said. He kissed her again, and stepping around her, strode rapidly along the boardwalk toward the Cascade Bar.

CHAPTER TWO

Salty Keeps a Promise

THE IDEA of Preacher Marvel needing help from the orphan kid who'd slept in the back room of the saloon struck Salty as being about the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Then he was pushing through the batwings of the Cascade Bar, and he forgot the preacher. He had never seen as big a crowd in the saloon as he saw here now.

The mahogany was crowded three deep, but none were buckaroos. Some were settlers, but most of them, he judged, were

ditch men. Horseface Jones who had tended bar for Dodge was wearing the apron. Another man, a stranger to Salty, was working with him.

Salty rammed his way to the mahogany, oblivious of the glares he received. One man cursed and raised his fist, and dropped it when he had a good look at Salty and the way he packed his gun.

"Howdy, Horseface," Salty drawled.

The barman stared for a minute before he recognized Salty. He said, "Howdy, boss," and made no offer to shake hands. "Want a drink on the house?"

"Sure." Salty poured a drink from the bottle Horseface shoved at him. "Looks like we're doing good."

"We're doing fine," the barman said, and turned to wait on another customer.

Salty didn't see Jones give a signal, but he was certain the barman had, for a man moved to where Salty stood, a small knot-headed man with a star on his shirt and a gun thonged low on his thigh. He asked, "You're Salty Bryce, ain't you?" in a flat hard tone.

Salty turned, and held his answer while he made his study of the man. It would be Rountree, the gunslick marshal. Salty had seen men like him; the deep-lined face, the tiny black eyes that shone like chipped obsidian in the sunlight, the quick way he had of moving his hands.

"I'm Bryce," Salty said. "I grew up in this town and I know it better than you do, mister. Likewise, I've got you pegged right down to a horsefly's eyebrow. You're tough. All right. So am I. We'll smoke it out any time you're ready."

Rountree laughed. "Proddy, ain't you, kid?"

"Not proddy. I just don't like your kind stinking up a town where I aim to live."

This time Rountree didn't laugh. His black eyes narrowed while wickedness pulled his lips tightly against his teeth. "You won't stay here long. This town grew up while you were gone, so they hired me to keep the lid on, which same I've been doing. I don't aim to let a tough kid blow in and start kicking dust in my face."

"Let's call that dust smoke," Salty murmured. "Gunsmoke."

Rountree shook his head, a wariness creeping into his thin face. He was an old hand at the game. He knew when to push and when to stand pat. Right now he wasn't sure just how tough and how fast Salty was.

"I want no trouble with you, Bryce, but I'm warning you. The first tough play you pull off will get you behind bars or a slug in your brisket."

"You ain't tough enough, tin star," Salty taunted. "Not nearly tough enough."

Preacher Marvel and Jeff Howison had hired Rountree, so Pete Schafer said. Now somebody, probably Horseface Jones, had tipped Rountree off who Salty was. It added up to something, but he wasn't sure what. So he'd made a bold play, hoping to prod Rountree into violent action. One way to unravel this thing was to get the upper hand and keep it. But Rountree was not to be prodded.

"I can read sign." The lawman's face was bone-hard; the corners of his mouth striking downward. "When the sign's right, I'll be tough enough to handle you."

Salty jeered a laugh. "Your tongue ain't long enough to hide your yellow streak, marshal. Stand aside and let a man by."

Salty moved straight at the lawman. If he had read Rountree right, the man couldn't stand that kind of pressure. He was right. He saw desire flame in the black eyes, suddenly wide and wicked. Then he broke and moved over. Grinning, Salty nodded and walked by.

There had been two poker tables in the back of the saloon when Salty had left. Now there were six strung along the east wall, and all were crowded. Salty saw Schafer and moved to him. The gambler had watched the scene at the bar. He called another man to take his hand and stepped toward Salty.

"You damned fool," Schafer said under his breath. "You trying to commit suicide?"

"No. Just busting a tough marshal."

"Rountree won't bust. I've seen him gun down boys who were tougher hands than you are."

"You just saw him back down," Salty said testily.

"You're not even smart," the gambler groaned. "Rountree's got his orders. Otherwise you'd be ready for a pine box."

"O. K." Salty shrugged. "I came in to talk with you."

Nodding, Schafer led the way between the tables and the bar to the back room. Salty stood motionless while Schafer shut

the door, looking around the room that Dodge Kelly had used for an office. The old leather couch where Salty had slept was against the far wall. The fly-specked picture of the grizzly rearing up on his hind legs and slobbering his defiance was still on the wall.

This was the nearest thing to a home Salty had ever known. It seemed that Dodge should be sitting there at the scarred desk, painfully pushing a pencil, his forehead wrinkled in thought while he wrote a letter or worked on his books.

Schafer stood against the door, not speaking until Salty brought his eyes to him. "Where was Dodge when they found him?"

"On the floor beside the desk." The gambler pointed. "I was the one who found him. He'd been hit a hell of a hard lick."

"What about Horseface Jones?"

Schafer swore. "Dodge liked him, and I reckon he's a good enough barman."

"Dodge liked everybody, Pete."

"Horseface was alone in the saloon when it happened. He claims Dodge took a bottle into the back room, so he thought Dodge was sleeping and didn't look in. I got worried when Dodge didn't show up that night. He always relieved Horseface after supper. That's how it happened to be me who found him. Rountree was in the saloon, and I called him in to look at Dodge. He allowed it was an accident, and let it go at that."

"Dodge had been dead quite awhile?"

"Doc figured he died in the middle of the afternoon."

"Then Horseface must have done it. Or who did."

"Maybe not." Schafer pointed to the back door. "Dodge kept it locked, but he'd have opened it if somebody had knocked."

Salty nodded, thinking about it. It could have been Pet Schafer himself, thinking he could buy the Cascade Bar from Salty. But it hadn't been Schafer who had shot at him at the depot. There was a good chance that the ambusher and Dodge's murderer were one and the same because anybody who had known Salty as a boy would know he'd run the killer down if it took the rest of his life.

"I'll find out," Salty said as if it were a promise to Dodge Kelly. "How much will you give me for this layout?"

Schafer looked puzzled. "You hoorawing me, kid?"

Salty shook his head. "I'll sell."

"What changed your mind?"

"My business, Pete. If you want the place, make an offer."

Schafer took a cigar out of his pocket and bit off the end. "If I buy the outfit, it might be some of my business. I figure Jeff Howison wants the place, but he isn't showing his hand yet. So he's working through Horseface Jones. Or maybe Crow Rountree. If you know something I don't. . . ."

"I promised Ann I'd sell," Salty broke in. "Don't let that go no farther."

Schafer rolled the cigar between his fingers, face granite-hard. "Did you know that Howison figures on marrying Ann?"

"The hell!"

"Nothing official, Howison claims, but he says he's got the preacher's blessing. Howison's going to start a bank. It's a case of him wanting to play big duck in the puddle, and he's after the prettiest girl in the country to run his house. That's why he wants this. He wants money fast, and he'll make it here."

A sickness crawled into Salty's middle. He was remembering Ann saying she thought it was Howison who was worrying her father, remembering how she had clung to him as if she thought she would lose him.

"Looks like me and Howison have some things to talk over," Salty murmured. "Now about this deal."

"I'm a fool for taking it," Schafer muttered. "Howison will explode all over the country when he hears I've got it. I've pokered him out of too much dinero for him to like me."

"Do you want it . . ."

"Hell, yes. I'll give you ten thousand. It's not worth it, but Dodge would want you to get a good price."

Salty nodded. "It's a deal. I suppose it'll take awhile for the will to be straightened out and for me to get the papers so we can wind this up."

Schafer chuckled. "Howison can do it for you."

"I was going to horn in on a council meeting." Salty moved toward the door. "I'll tell him while I'm there."

"Wait a minute. Let's put this agreement down on paper so we'll both be protected. If Howison gets tough, you can show him that the deal is waiting for the papers."

Salty hesitated, not liking the idea. A verbal agreement should be good enough, but Schafer didn't wait for Salty's approval. He took two sheets of paper from a drawer, pulled the cap from an ink bottle and began to write. He signed both sheets when he was done and turned them for Salty to read. They were the same, a statement of sale of the saloon to Schafer for ten thousand dollars, the transaction to be completed as soon as Salty came into legal possession of the saloon.

"Why was that necessary?" Salty asked.

"Might be I'd want to back out." Schafer folded the sheets and handed one to Salty. "Mostly it's a proposition of being able to tell Howison there's nothing he can do about it. There'll be some lead throwing when he knows about this. Don't forget that with you out of the way, he'll have the inside track with Ann."

"Reckon I'll throw some lead myself," Salty said, and left the room.

JEFF HOWISON had always, as far back as Salty could remember, been the important man of the community. He owned the biggest spread within fifty miles of Antlers. He was the only lawyer in town. He ran an unofficial banking business of sorts, loaning money to those who'd rather borrow at home than go to Prineville or The Dalles. Salty, pacing across the street to Howison's office, remembered that it was Howison who had loaned money to build the church and the parsonage, a debt that had not been paid.

Salty had never known Howison well, although he had seen him often enough when he'd lived with Dodge Kelly and he'd ridden for him the last year he'd been in Oregon. He wondered if anybody really knew Howison.

Opening the door, Salty stepped into the office. Howison, sitting at the far end of the room, looked up and stared at Salty a moment before recognition showed on his square face.

Jeff Howison was an austere man, massive of body and domineering of spirit. Although he set himself up as the community's conscience, he committed in private, and Salty knew this personally, the same sins he publicly condemned. More than that, he was a hard man in financial matters, using his money as a club to gain his own ends and his aims were high.

"Howdy, Jeff," Salty said.

The rest of them turned to see who had come in. Salty had known all of them except the marshal, Crow Rountree, who sat at Howison's right. Salty spoke to them impersonally, his gaze lingering for a moment on Preacher Marvel's rugged face.

"It's Salty Bryce," Marvel said in genuine surprise, and Salty was astonished to see a look of pleasure come into the preacher's eyes.

"Why, it *is* Salty," Howison said. He tried to make his voice friendly, and failed.

The preacher was the only one who rose and shook Salty's hand. Howison shifted uneasily. Rountree scowled, glancing at Howison as if for order, and receiving none, brought his gaze back to Salty. The rest fidgeted, not sure whether to follow Marvel's lead, or Howison's, and ended by remaining in their seats.

We're about done here, Salty," the preacher said. "Sit down. Have you seen Ann?"

Salty hesitated, not sure whether Marvel had really changed. He nodded. "I saw her."

"Good. We'll go back to the house as soon as we adjourn. We have an extra bed, so don't think of going anywhere else."

Two red spots had appeared in Howison's cheeks. He leaned back, hands on the arms of his chair. He glanced at Salty, then at Marvel, and brought his eyes back to the papers in his hands. Rage was a growing heat in him, and Salty, seeing it, could not hold back a smile.

"This is a little awkward, Parson," Howison said at last. "We don't usually have anybody here but the members of the council."

"I thought we were ready to adjourn," Marvel said.

"Not quite." Again Howison's eyes came to Salty as if measuring him. "Maybe it would be better, Bryce, if you stepped out until we're finished."

"I never heard of a town council that met secretly," Salty said with some heat. "You didn't tell me in your letter, but I understand that Dodge willed me the Cascade Bar. If I'm a property owner in Antlers, I have a right to be here."

"I'll move him—" Rountree began.

Howison held up his hand. "Did you

return to make trouble, Bryce did yuh?"

"No. I found trouble waiting for me."

Preacher Marvel, too, was scowling as if he didn't like this turn. He said, "Salty, go back to the house and visit with Ann. I'll be along shortly."

"Thanks, but I have business here. That's why I came in." Salty rose, right hand brushing gun butt. "I was a kid when I left. You gents are remembering me the way I was then. Reckon I was a little wild. Maybe I'm still wild, but I know what I want. One of the first things I'm going to do is to marry Ann Marvel."

Howison put his big palms flat against the table and hoisted himself to his feet. "Get out, Bryce," he rumbled. "Your personal business is none of ours."

When Jeff Howison talked that way, folks jumped. But Salty didn't. He laughed "Howison, you've pulled quite a bit of weight around here for a long time. They tell me the town's getting to be a real burg, growing right out from under you."

Rountree was on his feet now. The rest had pushed back against the wall. Marvel's craggy face showed a grim satisfaction. Salty, eyes raking the row of men, wondered if the preacher was glad to see somebody stand against Jeff Howison.

"I do carry a little more weight than an—"

"I know," Salty cut in. "An orphan kid who slept in Dodge Kelly's back room. That used to be good enough. It ain't now." He'd hit Howison hard when he said he was going to marry Ann Marvel. Pausing, he smiled at the big man's baffled rage, and struck again. "Somebody shot at me after I got down from the train. I hear that Dodge Kelly was murdered, but Rountree called it an accident. I aim to turn up the man who killed Dodge."

"If you can prove Rountree's wrong, we'll all be glad to see that justice is done," Howison said evenly.

"I'm thinking it's funny you didn't tell me in your letter that Dodge willed me the Cascade Bar," Salty plunged on. "Likewise, it's funny somebody was waiting for me at the depot tonight. I wrote you I'd be on the night train."

A murmur ran along the row of men. Howison's big fists clenched. There could be no escaping the implication of Salty's words. Howison had used power and wealth and the strength of his personality to smash his opposition. Now none of these weapons would work against the slim gray-eyed man who stood at the other end of the room.

"I didn't get your letter," Howison said lamely.

"I reckon you're lying, but it ain't important. Maybe you'll think it is important that I sold the Cascade Bar to Pete Schafer."

Salty laughed when he saw Howison's mouth spring open. He turned to Marvel. "I don't think Howison's gonna fool anybody much longer. I ain't one to run a saloon. Pete is, but it won't be the kind of place Howison would run if he'd made his scheme work."

"I don't want a saloon business," Howison bellowed.

"Or you wouldn't want a cut in Horseface Jones's saloon if you'd rigged the play so he'd have got it?"

"No," Howison flung at him.

"Then I guess I got you wrong, Jeff," Salty said ironically, and nodding at Marvel, left the room.

Salty slid into the shadows at the end of the block and waited. By putting a few guesses with what Schafer had told him, he had fixed it so Jeff Howison would have to strike. He waited half an hour, but nobody left Howison's office. He crossed the street then to the Cascade Bar, wondering when and how Howison's move would come.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Purge in Antlers

THE crowd in the Cascade Bar had thinned. Salty lingered at the table where Schafer was playing, hoping the gambler would ask what had happened in the council meeting, but Schafer showed no interest. He nodded when Salty came to the table, his face poker-stiff.

Crow Rountree came in and moved directly to Schafer. When he said something in a low tone, the gambler nodded, rose, and stepped away from the table. Rountree stood with his back to Salty while he talked. Schafer pinned his eyes on Salty, lips tightening as he listened.

This was trouble. Salty moved back to

the wall as the batwings gave to Howison's entrance, Marvel and the rest of the council members trailing him. Then Schafer stepped around the marshal, and strode toward Salty, face livid with suppressed rage.

"I put myself out to do you a favor," Schafer bawled, "and you pay me back with a skunk trick. Pull your iron, Bryce."

Salty had expected something like this from Rountree. Perhaps Howison. Not from Schafer.

"What's the matter with you, Pete?" Salty demanded.

"I don't lose ten thousand dollars like this," the gambler raged, "and take it lying down. Start smoking your iron."

"Don't try it," Salty warned. He saw the puzzled expression on Howison's face, saw Horseface Jones edge along the bar. Rountree was smiling coolly as if this was no immediate concern of his. "What riled you, Pete?"

Schafer had come to a stop ten feet from Salty. "Won't do you no good to try playing innocent. You sold me this place and then you fogged over to the council meeting and they passed an ordinance closing the saloon at midnight. What have I got? A license and a beaten-up old saloon that isn't worth a small part of ten thousand. You framed this with the council to bust me so I'd leave town. I won't stand for it. Draw or drag, damn you!"

"You're a fool, Pete," Salty said crisply. "I don't know nothing about that ordinance and I didn't frame it with the council. Howison and Rountree rigged this play so they'd be rid of one of us."

"You're lying," Schafer snarled. "I told you to make your play."

It was an old game and a good one. Howison, failing in his scheming, had fixed it with Rountree to turn Pete Schafer against Salty. Either way Howison won. If Salty killed Schafer, Howison would have the gambler out of the way and he could still buy the saloon. If Salty cashed in, Howison would have a clear field with Ann Marvel.

"Well?" Schafer demanded. "Have you guts enough to pull your gun?"

"Keep your hands off that scattergun, Jones," Preacher Marvel called.

A tight-lipped smile touched Salty's mouth. "Got the barkeep to side you, Pete?"

"Hell no," Horseface Jones roared. "You own the place, don't you, Salty? I always side the boss if somebody gets proddy."

"All right, Salty." Schafer wiped his forehead. "Get this straight. With an ordinance closing this place at midnight, it's worth about fifty cents. You've crooked me out of ten thousand."

Schafer wheeled and stalking into the back room, slammed the door.

Howison, his back to the bar, had said nothing. Now he called, "Bryce, looks like you'd better move on."

"You'd like that," Salty murmured. "I reckon I'll stay, Howison."

"No, you're drifting," Rountree said casually. "I told you I kept the lid on around here. The way I do it is to run the toughs out of town."

"It'll take ten tin stars your size to run me out," Salty snapped, anger suddenly boiling over in him. "We might just as well wind this up now. You figgered Pete would do your job. Reckon it's still up to you."

Rountree pulled out his watch. I'll give you five minutes to vamose, Bryce. I'm going over to the jail now. In five minutes I'll be coming across the street. Get out of town or come smoking your iron."

"Why wait five minutes?" Salty demanded.

Rountree strode out of the saloon without answering, boot heels cracking on the boardwalk and dying as he stepped into the dust of the street.

"Old Dodge always said you'd turn out to be a gun thrower," Howison said darkly, "but you won't last long against Rountree."

"I'll last long enough to get you," Salty said. "Pete thinks you're the coyote who beefed Dodge. If you are—"

"Go to hell." Howison stomped angrily out of the saloon. He hit saddle, and pouring steel to his mount, pounded down the street.

Pete Schafer had said Salty didn't have a friend in town. Now Salty was thinking that except for Ann, the gambler was right. There were no friendly faces in the saloon. His return had been a match lighting a fuse to a powder keg.

Salty hid his bewilderment by lifting his gun from leather and checking it. He'd left a brash kid, a wild one, they'd said, who made a fight if he didn't find one.

But he'd grown up in these four years, and he'd come back hoping to make a place in a community that had not received him as a boy. Now he saw he might as well wish for a piece of the moon. He was up to his neck in trouble the first night he was in town. They were thinking of that, these men who had known him before, the whole line from smirking Horseface Jones behind the bar to Preacher Marvel.

"You've got two minutes," Jones said. "You'd better drift, kid. I won't be out there with a scattergun in my hands to back you up."

Then for the second time that night Preacher Marvel surprised Salty. He stepped away from the others, and when he was close to Salty, he said in a low tone, "Ann loves you. I've seen the look on her face too many times when she got a letter from you. From what I've seen of you tonight, you've come a long ways from the kid I used to be afraid would run off with her. Don't go out there to fight Rountree. You've got to think of Ann."

"I am," Salty said simply. "I can't duck out and hope to live here with her."

"We're still living in the frontier," Marvel said with deep regret. "I didn't understand that when I first came to Antlers. Now I know that there are times when violence is the only way to stop evil." He laid a hand on Salty's shoulder. "I'm asking one thing for Ann. Give yourself a chance."

"I'm sorry."

Salty met the preacher's eyes. Marvel's stiff gray hair pointed stubbornly to the ceiling. Salty had never seen it any other way. It was, he thought, an indication of the man's stubborn character. Yet he was showing an understanding and a tolerance that Salty had not thought possible. Regret touched Salty Bryce then. Now, perhaps when it was too late, he and Preacher Marvel had come to understand each other.

"I'm sorry, too, for Ann's sake." Turning, Marvel left the saloon.

"Thirty seconds, Salty," Horseface Jones taunted. "Too late."

"Yeah, too late for your marshal," Salty murmured, and moved toward the batwings.

Suddenly fear was in Salty Bryce. Not fear of death or pain or defeat, but fear of failure. If he died before Crow Rountree's gun, Dodge Kelly's death would be unavenged. But he couldn't die. Not with Ann waiting for him. With Preacher Marvel changed in a way that was nothing short of miraculous.

He was outside the batwings then, in the patch of light washing out from the saloon's windows and door. Crow Rountree had stepped through the door of the jail into the street, a lamp on the table behind him throwing a long yellow finger half the width of the dust strip.

Rountree took two steps toward Salty, slow and deliberate steps before he called, "I told you to leave town, Bryce."

"What authority have you got to make me?" Salty flung at him.

"I have authority to arrest you for disturbing the peace. Throw down your gun and submit to arrest."

"Come and get me."

"Then pull your iron."

Crow Rountree had not expected to die. He threw a glance toward the alley that ran between the saloon and the hotel. Then he pulled gun. His draw was a fast smooth motion, but not fast enough. Salty's Colt roared once, the echo beating against the false fronts of the buildings. Rountree went down to his knees, held himself there for a moment with one hand in the dust, weaving a little as he fought to raise his gun. He brought it up, but Salty held his fire, for the barrel was slanting down, and the strength was not in the marshal to line it on Salty.

It was then that the racket of a struggle in the alley penetrated Salty's consciousness, and he heard Preacher Marvel's voice calling for help. He raced across the front of the saloon, glimpsed the two straining figures and the ribbon of orange flame, heard the shot. One man fell, the other whirled and disappeared into the alley.

"Get him," Marvel cried.

Salty plunged after the retreating figure, stumbled on some refuse, regained his footing and went on. The gun crashed again, powderflame dancing redly before him. He drove a bullet at the gun flash and ducked across the alley to the hotel wall.

He held that position a moment, knowing the other had not moved. Then he heard a long drawn "Ahhhhh," and the thud of a body as if it was entirely lax and without

control. Salty pulled the man into a vagrant gleam of light behind the hotel, but it wasn't Jeff Howison as he had expected. The dead man was little Pete Schafer.

Salty went back to Preacher Marvel. Men had poured out of the saloon, the doctor among them. Salty heard him say, "He's not so bad hit. Let's get him around home."

"Tell Ann I'll be along," Salty told the medico, and with his gun still palmed, turned into the Cascade Bar.

Horseface Jones was the only man inside. Pete Schafer was dead. Probably Crow Rountree was past talking. Jones, then, was the only one who would what had happened.

Salty paced deliberately to the bar, cocked gun held at his hip.

"You'll spill what you know," Salty said coldly, "or I'll put a window in your skull."

Jones licked meaty lips, started to reach for his shotgun and thought better of it, for Salty's gray-eyed stare held a grim promise.

"Pete beefed Dodge," Jones said hoarsely. "Rountree was into it, too, so he called it an accident. They made me lie about Dodge having a bottle with him when he died."

"They made you lie?" Salty asked. "Tell it straight, Jones."

The barman swallowed. "I was in it, too. Pete knew Howison had Dodge's will and you'd be sent for. Rountree always got Howison's mail, so he stole your letter saying you'd be here tonight."

Then Howison had told the truth. "Go on," Salty ordered.

"That's why Pete was at the depot." A film of sweat glinted in the lamplight on Jones's forehead. "He figured you wasn't one to run a saloon, and you'd jump at the chance of getting some quick dinero. Instead you cracked him on the jaw. Rountree took the shot at you from the sagebrush, thinking you'd scare into selling. When that didn't work, Pete figgered he'd get you and Howison into it over the girl. What we wanted was a wide open town with half a dozen saloons and crooked gambling, so we had to get Howison off the council someway."

"It still don't make sense, Pete and Rountree rigging this play to get me. I told Pete I'd sell."

"He didn't have ten thousand. He had the written agreement, and after you'd cashed in, he aimed to swear he'd paid you. That way he'd get this place for nothing. They could fix Howison's clock later."

"Now we'll look for the jail, Jones."

Preacher Marvel was in bed when Salty reached the house. "Dad's been asking for you," Ann said, and took him to her father's bedroom.

"What did you find out?" Marvel asked. When Salty told him, he said, "Both Howison and I thought Dodge had been murdered. That's another reason Schafer wanted both you and Howison killed. I thought something was up the way Schafer went into the back room and Rountree went out the front. Schafer likes a sure thing. That's why I ducked into the alley, and I found him waiting to shoot you when you drew on that damned Sheriff Rountree."

"I don't know how to thank a man when he saves my life—"

"I'm thanking you," the preacher cut in, "for teaching me a lesson I should have learned a long time ago. I'm not trying to excuse myself for treating you the way I did when you were a boy. It was just that I wanted Ann to have everything, and I knew you couldn't give it to her. I lost sight of the fact that love is the most important thing in the world. Yes, the most important."

"Ann said she thought you were in trouble—"

"Howison wants to marry her," Marvel said soberly. "That's the trouble I've been trying to keep out of for weeks. Now I can clearly see a way to get him over the notion."

"What's that?"

"Marry her yourself."

"I'm still going to sell the Cascade Bar as soon as I find a buyer. Then I'm going to apply for a job as marshal."

"You won't have any trouble getting that," Marvel said.

"Then I reckon we can fix Mr. Howison." Salty grinned at Ann. "About tomorrow."

THE END

Gun That Greenhorn Down!

By RICHARD BRISTER

Peter raised the rifle over his head as Borkly rod. up.

That peace-loving pilgrim, Peter Yerkes, piloted his Murphy wagon against a back-shoot, hell-camp tyrant, to get enough lumber to build a house for his ailing wife —and a pine board coffin for himself. . . .

BACK HOME in New Hampshire, Peter Yerkes thought darkly, a man like this Borkly would not be permitted to stay in business. Peter propped his arms on the lumberman's desk and said in a flat, bitter tone, "You're out of your mind, Borkly. You must be crazy."

Borkly teetered his chair against the wall of his office. A large man, this Elmo P. Borkly, with the paunchy frame and straw-

berry complexion of one who lived comfortably off the efforts of others. He slouched in the straining chair, and blew cigar smoke at Peter.

"How long you been in Placer, young feller?"

"Drove in with my wife yesterday," Peter said. "She's none too strong, Borkly. I've got to get some kind of house up, and quick, with winter coming. If you'll quote a *reasonable* price for the lumber I need—"

"Already have," Elmo P. Borkly drawled past his cigar.

"Two dollars a board foot!" choked out Peter. "Man, be serious with me. At that price, it'd run me close to five thousand for lumber alone, not to speak of—"

"That's my price," said the lumberman calmly.

Peter stepped back from the desk and settled limply into the visitors' chair, wiping globules of perspiration from his forehead. The long wagon trip West had taught him to grin at hardships, but he was close to the snapping point now.

Placer had been the end of the rainbow for poor Ellen and him. How many nights under how many strange skies they had lain dreaming aloud of their life-to-be in this goldstrike town. Ellen was so eager to make a home, after the exhausting trip, and Peter had been afire with ambition to set up shop in some business or trade. For at thirty, Peter had almost as many skills as he had years. A versatile man, eager to strike out in something—anything—on his own.

"This ruins me, Borkly," he said. "I've saved up some money, but I can't afford to sink my whole stake into shelter."

Borkly twisted his cigar between a plump thumb and forefinger, saying nothing.

Peter said, "Don't you have any second-grade—"

"All my lumber is first-grade, seasoned pine, young feller." The big man looked bored. "I ain't running no bargain counter. Don't have to. This here's a boom town. Reckon you know that, if you've spent the night here."

"I know," groaned Peter. "Eggs fifty cents apiece. Twenty-five cents for a pound of flour. I knew things would be high, but—"

"But you don't want to meet my price for lumber," grinned Borkly, and shrugged his wide shoulders. "Don't have to, if you don't want to. Still . . . there ain't another stick for sale anywheres else in Placer. An' it looks to be a rough winter. Mercury hit twenty below last year, young feller."

"So they tell me," nodded Peter.

"You got two choices," smiled Borkly. "Keep on amovin', or build fer the winter."

Peter stared at the floor in despair, wondering what he was going to do about Ellen. He *couldn't* go on. Ellen was too dog-tired from the long months of steady travelling already behind her, to tackle another long journey. She'd make a game try, if Peter put the facts to her, but it would probably be the death of her.

Peter said thoughtfully, "Where do you get your lumber from, Borkly?"

The question produced an instant change in the lumberman's manner. For the first time since Peter had entered his office, Borkly's eyes flicked at the New England pilgrim with a gauging interest.

"You're new to this country," he suggested. "That bein' the case, I'm gunna overlook yer curiosity, fella."

Peter's calloused hands tightened, and he said impatiently, "No need to get on your high horse, is there, Borkly?"

"Son," growled Borkly, "if I was to go scoutin' out into the hills, and make me a nice little goldstrike, I'd take it mighty unkindly if you was to ask me where it was I'd run onto the color."

"All right," nodded Peter. "But I'm not asking—"

"You're askin' too much," snapped Borkly. "I ain't tellin' no man how I run my affairs, nor inquirin' into how he runs his. You want to buy lumber, or don't you?"

"No," flared Peter.

"Git, then."

As a Yankee, less than seven months away from his native New Hampshire, Peter's understanding of frontier etiquette was extremely spotty. He felt anger burn in him, at this uncivilized invitation to leave. A Yankee stubbornness flared in him.

"I don't like that kind of talk, Borkly," he said. He got off his chair, and moved toward the lumberman's desk.

Borkly slid a hand under his black town coat. Peter stared down the muzzle of a

mean-looking derringer, which pointed unwaveringly at his middle.

"Turn around," Borkly said. "Start walking."

Peter stood scowling down the gaping gun muzzle. Borkly's mouth twitched. He jabbed the gun forward. "I'd sure hate to irrigate you, friend. Hate spillin' blood on the floor of my office. Bad fer business. Git, now! Hear me?"

It came to Peter with a gruesome shock that this fat, well-fed devil actually *would* shoot him, if pressed to it further. Peter prided himself on his physical courage, but he was wise enough to leaven courage with common sense, in this crisis.

He turned, therefore, and walked gingerly toward the door.

"Next time," spat out Borkly behind him, "you want to unleash your tongue on a Western man, friend, you'd better be totin' an iron. There's men in these diggin's that'd gutshoot a greenhorn like you jest to see how many floorboards you'd cover. Keep goin'. And close that door gentle. One of them hinges is busted."

PETER slammed the door against Borkly's dry cackles, and went storming up the footpath that served the crude little town for a sidewalk. He swept past a squat hovel where liquor could be had at two dollars a drink. The stench of cigar smoke and whisky fumes was like a pressing hand in his face, crinkling his nostrils.

Placer was hardly a town by civilized standards, he thought, recalling the neat, tree-bordered streets of the New Hampshire village he and Ellen had come from. Placer was more like a camp, with fully twice as many tents as frame buildings. Haste marked the stride of the frowning men who walked Placer's streets. A tense aura of gold lust hung over the town like a threatening cloud.

The mood of this place fitted no part of Peter's Yankee nature, and he knew a moment of regret for having brought Ellen out here on what might well turn out to be a wild goose chase. But a man must strike out for himself sometime, if he wishes to make any success in this world. Peter found some comfort in that thought as he strode past the last group of crude tents toward the sturdy wagon in which he had left Ellen napping.

The staked-out horses neighed and champed the ground at his coming. Ellen awoke and peered at him, childlike, above the tailboard of the wagon. Peter felt a thrust of gut-twisting panic at sight of her wan, high-boned face, so lovely in its halo of ash-colored hair; but tired, so tired.

"Darling, you're back," she said, as though he had just now returned from some far trip. "Did you get it?"

Peter groaned inside and said, "Ellen, we're beaten. He wanted two dollars the board foot. It's this crazy town. The gold fever. Everything's sky high. I knew that, of course, before I saw Borkly. But his price is outlandish."

"We—we can't stay then?"

"We've got to," groaned Peter. "But as for building—Borkly's got us, blast him! Nobody else has lumber to sell and with winter coming—well, it's a seller's market."

"I see." Ellen was smiling bravely, but he knew her too well to be taken in. She was almost at rock bottom. She had held her frail body and soul together by sheer grit so far, sustained by the dream of settling down for a long rest, once they reached Placer. So now they had reached Placer, and it appeared they were due for more trouble, and for Ellen it was too much.

Peter saw her lip start to tremble, saw her bite at it, fighting the tears back. She gripped the tailboard of the wagon, scraped her hands along it, and collapsed.

Peter climbed into the wagon, cursing heartfully, and laid her gently back on one of the pallets. He took a canteen off a peg behind the driver's box, and pressed it between Ellen's hlaf-parted lips. Her eyes opened and she stared up at him, birdlike.

"I—I'm sorry, Peter. That was silly of—"

"It's not your fault," Peter said through clenched teeth. A great anger raged in him. "It's me. Dammit, it's me! Any man worth his salt wouldn't have put you through what you've—"

"Peter!" She touched his lips. "Don't say that. You've done your best. It's not your fault lumber's so expensive. We'll drive on. Some other town—"

"No," he said. Kneeling there, cradling her in one long arm, he told himself fiercely that she must not be tested like this again. Ellen had fought her fight on the trip west,

fought it gamely and without complaint. It was his fight now. It was time, he thought, that he exerted himself to make things easier for her.

"Darling," he said, "just you lie here awhile. Relax. I'm goin' back downtown."

"Why?" She looked worried.

"I'll arrange something, somehow. We're staying here, Ellen. That's final. You've hit your last trail for a while, little lady."

* * *

In the Miner's Exchange he brushed conversation with an idle clerk, and posed his most pressing problem. "Got my wife up street aways in a wagon. Just trailed in from back east. Wife's down, sort of peaked. Any idea where a man can shelter a sick woman, here in Placer?"

The clerk shook his oversized head at Peter. "Turrible place for sick folks, this is. Placer's gold crazy. Got no bloomin' heart. 'Course like everywheres else, money'll talk, even in Placer."

"Yes?" Peter nodded.

"Ain't but one chance fer you, son. An' that's one in a hundred. Sol Granby's woman might take yer wife in. Granby runs the mercantile here in Placer. His wife ain't much t' look at, but she's a woman, I reckon. She might take yer wife in, fer the sake of someone t' talk to. 'Course, Sol's all business. He'll drive a sharp bargain."

Peter thanked the man for the information. He turned to go then, but said as an afterthought, "You wouldn't happen to know where a man could lay his hands on a bit of lumber, without paying Borkly's squeeze prices?"

"Why, now," said the clerk, "you don't want to bandy Elmo Borkly's name around that way, stranger. Borkly's a mighty big man here in Placer. Yes, sir, a mighty—"

"About the lumber?" said Peter.

"Borkly's yer man. Yes, sir."

"Nobody else has a stick—"

"Nup."

"Where's Borkly get it?" asked Peter.

"Mule-wagons it in acrost the Barrancas. Fifty mile of the roughest trail you ever laid eyes on. Two dollars a board foot, and wuth it, when you figger the trouble it—Sa-a-ay, what's your interest?"

"Same as a cat's," said Peter. "Thanks again, for the tip about Sol Granby's woman."

He found Mrs. Sol Granby at home ten minutes later. Peter talked earnestly, and to some effect, for the bright-eyed old woman finally flung up her hands and said, "Well, good gracious, young man, bring her around and let a body have a look at this paragon of feminine virtues, if it means that much to you. Lank sakes, you'll have me crying. . . ."

Peter fetched Ellen to her. He was not really surprised to see that Mrs. Granby used his absence to summon her husband from the mercantile store.

As the clerk had warned, the crotchety old store owner drove a hard bargain. Peter made what ground he could against the old man, and it was arranged, finally, that Ellen could occupy a room and take meals with the Granbys for "the piddling consideration," as old Granby termed it, of "twenty-five dollars a week, payable one week in advance."

Peter agreed and drew a strange look from Ellen, for to her Yankee eyes this was a heartwrenching outlay of hard-earned money. But as Peter told her, before parting: "It's a temporary arrangement, darling. There's no other place, and your health's most important. And—well, I've got a thought that may solve our problem."

"Can you tell me, Peter?"

"It's all sort of sketchy, yet," he said, shrugging. "I figure to find where Borkly gets his lumber, and buy at his source. I've learned it's only a fifty mile trip. And we do have the wagon. The horses are in pretty fair condition, all things considered."

She was smiling tremulously at him. "Oh, Peter, if only you could! If we only could build and stick through one winter, and get our roots in solidly somewhere."

"We're goin' to," said Peter, and hugged her. "This town's going to grow fast, Ellen, and we'll grow along with it."

He walked through the town, thinking of that. He asked a discreet question, here and there, and soon he had what he wanted. Borkly bought from a man named Smith, who operated a sawmill in the pine woods near Cocheecki, a tiny Indian village across the Barrancas. Most of Placer believed that Smith sold finished lumber for twenty-five cents the board foot, though none Peter questioned could be certain on that score.

What amazed Peter, with his Yankee

training, was the casualness with which the town watched Borkly turn such an outrageous profit.

"A word of advice to you, son," one oldster suggested. "Don't you mess around with Elmo Borkly."

"Mess around?"

"He's no man to cross swords with, not in Placer," said oldster, and would say no more. "Talked too dang' much already," he said, and scurried away like a frightened old rabbit.

Apparently it was Peter who had done too much talking, for as he approached the edge of the town, where his wagon team waited, a tall, slouch-shouldered man fell into step with him. The man said laconically, "Rumor goin' around town you're fixin' t' run Elmo Borkly's gantlet, young feller."

Peter tried to make out the man's features in the faint moonlight. "Borkly's gantlet?" he mumbled.

"Can't say's I blame you, son. I wouldn't be spreadin' it around much neither, if it was me buckin' up agin Borkly. All I say is: If you make it, and find you got a bit more wood than you'll be needin', I'd sure admire t' take some off your hands. Name's Purvis. Remember that, will you?"

"A-All right," said Peter, and watched the man disappear in the night. Borkly's gauntlet, he thought, as he neared his wagon. So that was—

"Evenin', Yerkes."

Peter stood motionless. That voice had a familiar twang, he told himself bleakly. He swung around the end of the wagon, even as Elmo P. Borkly walked out in plain view. The man was a much more imposing figure when standing. A cigar split his teeth, and as he puffed it, the glow lit up his flat-featured face in ghostly relief.

Two men stood behind him, flanking the lumberman at each elbow.

Borkly chuckled softly at Peter, "Friends of mine, Yerkes. This here's Showdown McGarret. That's Jack Wilson. Take yer hands off yer guns, boys, an' shake hands with the New Hampshire pilgrim."

The men laughed, not moving.

"Speak your piece, Borkly," said Peter, "and get away from my horses and wagon."

"Why, that ain't no way to talk, pilgrim. Can't say's I like that." He flicked his eyes sidewards. "How about that, boys? You like the way this here pilgrim's talkin'?"

"Mebbe he ain't smart, Boss," said Showdown McGarret.

"He sure ain't," said Jack Wilson.

"Yerkes," said Borkly, "it seems like the boys don't cotton to you. Now, that's a shame. Never seen these boys take such a dislike to a pilgrim. Mebbe it's account of the talk around town."

"Say what's on your mind, Borkly."

"Mebbe," said the lumberman, "it's account of the rumors you're fixin' to run a load of outlaw wood across the Barrancas."

"Outlaw wood!" Peter snorted. "Excuse me if I don't get your meaning. I've got a sick wife on my hands. I can't move her out of town, and I can't afford to build her a house for the winter, not at your price for lumber. If I choose to haul in my own lumber, it's—"

"It's like to make Showdown an' Jack here sort of short-tempered," cut in Borkly. "An' that's a fact. These two rannigans sure hate t' see any wagons but mine truckin' wood into the diggin's. Gits 'em onreasonable angry, fer a fact."

"I see what you mean," said Peter slowly.

Elmo P. Borkly peered closely at him. Apparently he read capitulation into Peter's lax stance, for he laughed, and said in a friendlier tone, "No hard feelin's, pilgrim. Nothin' personal in this, understand. You an' me'll git along fine, so long as you mess out of my business. They's one thing I never had much use fer, in my line, an' that's competition. . . . Come on, boys. Come on, boys. Unclaw yourselves from them hoglegs, and let the pilgrim breathe easy. . . . 'Night, Yerkes."

Peter nodded coldly, as the three swung away into the night. He climbed up on the wagon box, took out his old briar pipe, and sat for ten minutes, blowing lazy smoke wreaths at the grinning face of the man in the moon.

Shooting at the moon. That's what he was doing, he thought limply, in trying to cross a man as firmly ensconced in this town as Elmo Borkly. Shooting at the moon.

And yet, what choice had he, really? There was the problem of Ellen, there was his certain knowledge that he must gamble now or be crushed underfoot in this hard-boiled town. Sometimes a man had to forget his conservative New England training

and adapt himself to new ways of thinking and acting.

Peter stuffed his pipe in his pocket, and went to work at once, harnessing the four to the wagon. The horses were testy, ill-tempered at prospect of a night job, but Peter's hand was firm and his voice was a soothing caress. Ten minutes later he had pulled up in back of the Granby place and was deep in conversation with the old mercantile owner.

"Figger to bring in a load of wood, hey?" Granby stroked a bristly chin, and his moist eyes gauged Peter's hard mouth, the height and breadth of the New Hampshire pilgrim. "And you'd like t' dump your belongin's?"

Peter nodded.

Granby frowned. "Puts me in a tight spot, young feller. If I let you empty that wagon here, I'm sort of takin' sides against Borkly. That ain't healthy, in this town. Showdown McGarret and Jack Wilson ain't gonna—"

"If it will endanger your life, Mr. Granby," said Peter, seeing his dream dissolve, "I won't ask—"

"On the other hand," mused Sol Granby, "I could say you'd dumped the stuff here on the sly, without my knowin' about it. Ever'one knows me and my wife is sound sleepers. . . . You go ahead, Yerkes. Make it fast, and keep it quiet." He was leading Peter toward the back door. "And mind, now, I don't know nothin' about it." He grasped Peter's hand. "Good luck."

Peter had his wagon stripped down to bare wood and metal within a half-hour. He slipped out of town and headed west under the friendly curtain of a now moonless night. He located the trail across the Barrancas, and reined the four down to a walk which covered the ground quickly enough, but which the beasts could maintain without effort.

The moon came out and stayed out, a friendly beacon, bathing the pebbly trail with a hazy glow. Peter drove along, hour upon hour, listening constantly for the clatter of hoofs on his backtrail. But Showdown McGarret and Jack Wilson did not come, as he had expected.

Peter loosened the carbine in its boot beside the high seat. As the cold dawn cut through him, he itched to use the gun, to unleash his cramped muscles in some sort of action which would warm them. Mostly, he wanted an end to waiting for what must come sooner or later—the showdown with Borkly.

He dragged into Smith's sawmill in midmorning a bedraggled, trailworn ghost of the man who had left Placer the night before. Smith was a stout, jolly man, with an honest eye and a ready laugh. He heard Peter out, and said, "Guess you know what you're doin', buckin' Elmo Borkly. You ain't the first one's tried this stunt, son. Shoot a gun purty good, can you?"

"I grew up with a rifle in my hand," said Peter.

"Good thing," nodded Smith. "Personally, I'd like to see you make it, young feller. I'm a businessman. I sell lumber to whoever can pay for it. Your money's as good as Borkly's to me. . . . Borkly's holdin' Placer back if you ask me. Won't buy near what the town needs, for fear it'll force his price down."

"I know," said Peter.

"Now, if one man—just one, mind you—was to get through," said Smith, "I think the town would revolt against Borkly. They'd organize, and start shipping their own lumber in. Reason they haven't done anything yet is they're gold crazy. Can't think about anything else. But there'll be pneumonia in Placer, this winter. They'll freeze like rats, and then what good'll their gold dust do 'em?"

Peter said, "I'm no crusader. I have my own problem. I've no choice but to try and and run my own wood in."

The fat man's eyes gauged him. "Come up to the house, Yerkes. My woman'll fix you something to eat, then you can sleep the day out. You'll want the night for your trip back to Placer. Meanwhile, I'll have your wagon loaded, and your horses looked after. How's that program strike you?"

"Prime," said Peter. He smiled. "Where in New England do you hail from, Smith?"

"Maine," said the stout man. "You're from Vermont, I'd judge from your accent."

"Close," said Peter. "Wrong side of the river."

AT DUSK, reporting at the mill, he found his wagon groaning under its load of fine seasoned lumber, lashed into place with long lengths of hemp. He paid Smith four

hundred dollars in cash, accepted a receipt, and shook Smith's hand warmly.

"Good luck," Smith said. "And never doubt that you'll need it. Borkly will surely answer this challenge."

Peter nodded gravely from the box. "When he does, I'll be calling on Old Billy Bang here." He touched the hickory stock of the carbine, then clucked to his horses and got his precious load rolling.

The old wagon groaned down the rutted road. The creaking harness, accompanied by the rhythmic clop-clop of hoofs, sang a song of disaster. Peter thought of Showdown McGarret, of surly Jack Wilson, of Elmo Borkly's oil-smooth warning, and shivered within his brown coat.

He had no doubt that McGarret and Wilson would be waiting, somewhere along the way back to Placer, to kill him, and incidentally, to commandeer his four-hundred-dollar cargo of lumber. Borkly could afford to wait before striking. And he *would* wait, to turn that kind of profit.

Peter rode for an hour, then stopped at the side of the trail. He took a bundle of grimy, mud-splotched clothes from beneath the seat, and dismounting, proceeded to stuff the trousers and shirt with bunch grass. He worked with great care, and in less than an hour, he had fashioned as realistic a scarecrow as ever reigned over a New England cornfield.

"You ain't just the handsomest man I ever met," Peter chuckled, clapping his hat atop the dummy's cloth head, "but you'll do, Reuben. You'll do by pale moonlight."

"Now to lead the reins under your arms, Reuben," grinned Peter. The effect was fine, for when Peter crouched behind the seat, his back pressed against the load of lumber, his body concealed by the overlapping folds of the tarp, no man could guess that Reuben's stout arms were not guiding the horses.

Peter lifted his voice in song as he got his load rolling, partly to dispel the darkening mood that now gripped him, partly to further the illusion of the dummy upon the box. For to an enemy eye, it must surely seem that Reuben was doing both the rein-handling and the vocalizing.

The enemy did not strike for another two hours.

They struck without warning, of course, for it was not the way of Elmo Borkly to extend even the rattlesnake's courtesy to an intended victim. Peter heard the flat crack of gunfire above and to the right of the trail. A slug whistled venomously through the night air. Peter watched Reuben, saw the dummy man leap to the impact of the bushwhack slug.

Peter stopped singing, ending his song on a throaty gurgle to enhance his little illusion. He held his reins with an iron hand, braced his back against the load, and shoved the dummy man sidewise on the seat with his foot.

The horses, well-trained, inured to gunfire, snorted and rattled the harness a bit, then settled down to the same slow pace they had held before the bushwhack slug had pierced Reuben.

Peter smiled, took up his carbine from the boot, and held his breath, waiting. He went on a half mile. Nothing happened. He began to wonder at the craft of the enemy. Had they seen through his little illusion?

He shuddered to think it. But then came the clop-clop of hoofs from behind, growing steadily closer.

From the corner of his eye, Peter watched a rider swing up past him and veer toward the lead pair, making a grab for the off horse's bridle. And on the other side came another, the two converging upon Peter's horses, to halt them.

Peter cowered behind the tarp. He lifted his carbine, and aimed it at Showdown McGarret. Neither rider had offered more than a casual glance at the twisted figure of Reuben slumped on the seat. Peter wondered at that, till he heard a familiar voice boom out of the darkness behind him.

"Stop them horses, McGarret. They'll run right over the rim o' the gorge in a minute, without nobuddy t' hold 'em on trail around that turn. There's a prime load of wood on that wagon."

Borkly! Peter felt his blood turn to ice. It surprised him that the lumberman had himself joined this party. Borkly had seemed an indolent sort, the kind who would rather order a man killed than dirty his own hands with the killing.

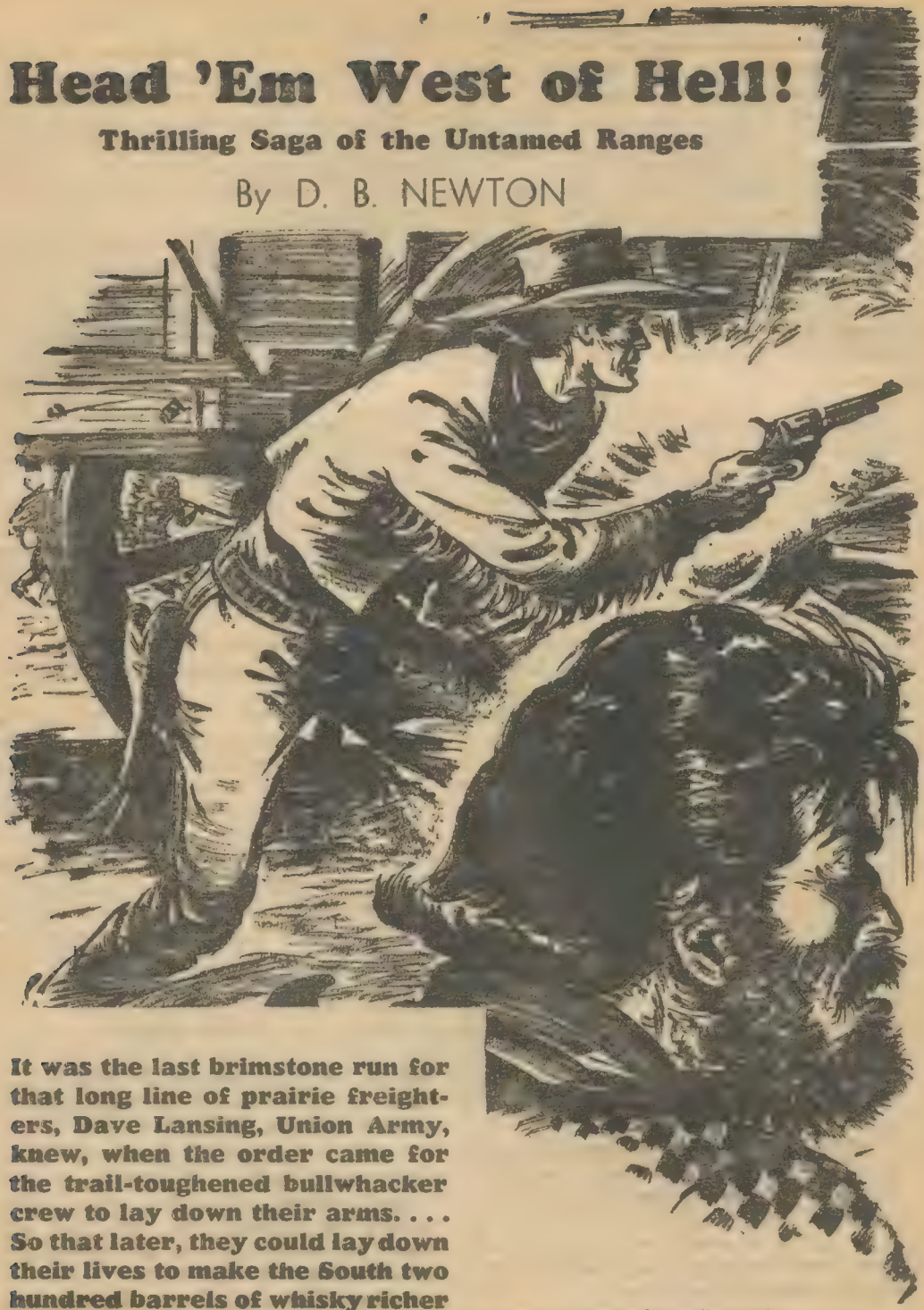
"Don't worry about the pilgrim, Wilson," Borkly was growling. "Had him dead in my sights, against the moon. Took him clean through the lungs."

(Continued on page 97)

Head 'Em West of Hell!

Thrilling Saga of the Untamed Ranges

By D. B. NEWTON



It was the last brimstone run for that long line of prairie freighters, Dave Lansing, Union Army, knew, when the order came for the trail-toughened bullwhacker crew to lay down their arms. . . . So that later, they could lay down their lives to make the South two hundred barrels of whisky richer —and the Union short one hundred loyal sons!

Dave's first volley took three of the raiders.

CHAPTER ONE

River Town Treachery

DAVE LANSING sipped at his tin cup full of sweet cider, and thought of beer. Though far from being a drinking man, it would have taken more than this insipid stuff to wash away the bad taste that was in his mouth just then.

He saw the faces of heavy-shouldered, roughly dressed bullwhackers, upturned in sullen silence to the haranguing of the old man on the platform yonder. The slanting sun of late afternoon made golden light beneath tree heads of the little grove. A breeze touched the silken white beard of the speaker, ruffled his thinning hair across a broad, waxen forehead as he talked fervently of home, of mother, of the honor of freighting needed food and medicine and

clothing to brave pioneers beyond the empty plains.

". . . It is a high purpose, to which we dedicate every turn of the wheels, as our great trains of canvas-clouded schooners roll ever westward toward the sunset—"

The oratory made Lansing wince and have another drag at the cider. He thought: *The pious fraud!* Apparently it wasn't bad enough, expecting every tough bullwhacker who signed on with the company to take a pledge never to swear, drink or gamble. In addition to that, on the day before a big train pulled out of the Nebraska river town its crew had to gather and let old John Walburton preach this kind of drivel to them.

Scorn touched Lansing's gray eyes, drew down the corners of his mouth. And just then he lifted his head, and his eyes met those of a girl on the seat of a democrat buggy that was parked not a dozen feet from him, at the edge of the crowd.

He knew she caught his expression and read the cynicism of it correctly, for a frown of disapproval clouded her brow beneath the bright ribboned bonnet. Since she was old Walburton's granddaughter, he could understand her frown. But some rash impulse made Dave return her stare, challengingly, until color rose into her fair cheeks and she turned away with an angry toss of her head.

This Peggy Walburton was a damn pretty girl, all right. . . . Then he became aware that the young man beside her in the democrat had caught this interplay of glances and was scowling darkly. Dave Lansing took quick warning. He had reasons for not wanting to attract attention from Bob Cooper, or anyone else high in the Walburton organization.

Prompted by this thought he turned quickly away, just as the old man finished his peroration and the crowd began breaking up into a mill. But he did not move quickly enough, for young Cooper's voice came after him across the rising talk:

"You! Come back here!"

With a shrug, Dan Lansing heeled around to obey the sharp summons. Cooper was leaning forward on the buggy seat, the reins in his slim gloved hands. He was well dressed, clean shaven, good-looking; no older than Lansing—young, indeed, to have attained a position as general manager for John Walburton, and the most likely candidate for the hand of Peggy. He said now, "You will apologize to Miss Walburton for your insolence!"

Lansing stared at the hotheaded young man. From the tail of his eye he saw the gaunt, whiteheaded shape of John Walburton coming toward them through the light and shade beneath the tress.

Dave Lansing had no liking for Bob Cooper and the necessity of yielding was bitter. But he knew he did not dare provoke an argument that could gain him nothing and might even cause prompt dismissal from the company, and so he swallowed down his pride.

He looked at the girl. "If I did anything wrong," he muttered woodenly, "I reckon I apologize." And turning on the flat heel of his cowhide boot, he moved away.

"That's not good enough!" young Cooper called angrily. But then Lansing heard the softer tones of the girl and guessed that she was interceding for him. He did not look back. Before old Walburton had reached the buggy, Lansing was losing himself in the milling crowd and a bad situation had passed over.

He thought, *I'll have to watch myself!* However, no damage had been done. None of those people knew him by name, and tomorrow morning early the wagon train would be pulling out and there would be no further danger of a brush with them.

Dave Lansing walked down the hill from the Grove, in the stream of men heading toward town after the meeting. Greggsport lay below him, sprawled along the brown and muddy ribbon of the Missouri. At the dock the funnels of a sternwheel packet scribbled smoke trails across the sky, as freight was hurried ashore by long lines of sweating stevedores.

The warehouse and wagon yard of Walburton & Company made the biggest single spread in town. There, the big, high-heeled wagons would already be loaded in preparation for the morning's departure. Evening was coming on now, sunset a wide smear of crimson across the sky.

Entering the little river town, Dave Lansing smiled tightly as he saw Walburton's bullwhackers heading straight for waterfront grog shops and a last night of debauchery, before they had to exchange these opportunities for the peril and loneli-

ness of the prairie trails. Was old John really as big a fool as he seemed, to think his moralisms had any effect on those simple, hardhanded, goodnatured men who for years had served him in the building of his freighting fortunes? Or was such talk only a pious mask for a grimmer, deeper game?

It was Lansing's job to find out. . . .

He did not himself head for the grog shops, but instead found an eat shack and had a hasty supper as gray night shadows drew across the windows and kerosene lamps were lighted. Afterwards, leaving a silver dollar on the table, he went out and paused in the doorway a moment looking across the darkling water of the Missouri, where lights showed in the rigging of the docked steamboat.

A night breeze came off the river, breathed against a face that was lean and strong, with flat, bronzed cheeks and eyes clear gray under a well shaped forehead.

He went through the dark streets then, keeping to the shadows, until he came to an obscure sidestreet hotel. He hesitated here, trying to determine if there was any chance of his having been followed. Seeing no evidence of that, he slipped inside and crossed the dingy lobby, went up the uncarpeted stairs to the second floor. At a certain door he knocked, twice; there was silence and then a voice ordered crisply, "Come in!"

Turning the knob, Lansing entered. As a straight shouldered, gray haired man turned from the window, Lansing made a brief military salute. The other returned it, and with a smile said, "At ease, Sergeant."

Formality thus dispensed with, the older man motioned Lansing to a chair and the latter sank into it, accepting the cigar that was offered him. He had worked with Captain William Sharp long enough that, in or out of uniform, there was between them little of the stiff relationship usual between officers and enlisted man. Now the captain, dressed in mufti like himself, eased down on the edge of the hard bed and remarked, "Well, ready for tomorrow?"

"Ready enough, Bill." The noncom made a face. "Just been through a last minute briefing from old Walburton—and, incidentally, had a run-in with young Cooper." He told briefly of the scene. The officer frowned a little.

"Wouldn't want anything to slip now," he said. "A lot depends on us. Obviously, the South is getting desperate, and their agents that have been contacting Walburton are bound to make some overt move soon—probably within the next few weeks."

"If we only had something definite to go on!"

"But we don't. And that's precisely where you and I, Dave, fit in—you, in the ranks of Walburton's bull train crews; and I, working to try and uncover something at this end. Perhaps we'll learn nothing—or perhaps it'll come too late. But we do know this for a fact: The War can't last much longer, unless the South is able to pull some trick out of the hat—some diversion for which we aren't prepared. Whatever that proves to be, I figure from the signs that Walburton is scheduled to have a hand in it."

"He was always a Southern sympathizer, wasn't he?"

Sharp nodded. "Yes. The whole organization is shot through with them. Moreover, the fact that they hold Army contracts for carrying freight to our Overland Trail posts is what gives an excellent chance for treachery from within."

"Well, the old man would probably be only too glad to make an effort to help the Southern cause. Especially," Lansing added drily, "if it could be turned to some profit for himself. Personally, with all his phony moralistic talk, I'm beginning to think the old man must be the world's prize hypocrite!"

He shoved the cigar between flat, solid lips, came to his feet. "This train I'm heading out with tomorrow isn't a military shipment, I understand; it's just taking an ordinary loading of supplies to the Salt Lake Mormons. But once out on the trails, maybe I can catch wind of whatever devilment is afoot within the company. That remains to be seen."

The captain came off the bed, took a quick stride to a position where he could glance carefully past the shade of the window. He looked worried.

"I'm probably mistaken," he muttered, "but I've had an uneasy feeling that someone in the street is watching this room. I certainly hope I'm wrong—I'd hate to think

I'd been spotted before we're even started.

"Nevertheless, you better be careful leaving here, just in case. If I have been discovered, we mustn't let them learn of any connection between the two of us. That would scotch all our chances. . . ."

The captain's warning bothered Lansing as he closed the door behind him, went along the musty, deserted hallway and down the creaking stairs to the lobby. He tossed his half-smoked cigar into a brass spittoon beside the desk, stepped out and paused in shadows beside the hotel entrance, watching and listening.

Full night had come. A mesh of stars glittered in the sky above the harsh outlines of roof-edges; but there was no moon, nor any sight or sound of movement in the dark street.

Dave Lansing started up the beaten dirt path, heading for the bright lights which marked the juncture with one of the town's main streets. A prickly feeling of danger touched his spine and it persisted. He suddenly regretted the fact that he was unarmed. . . .

Then, out of shadows piled in the slot between two buildings at his right hand, there came the crunch of boots and suddenly the weight of two men's bodies fell upon him, in silent and murderous rush.

THE FIRST attacker nearly missed him in the darkness, only succeeding in throwing him offbalance and hurling him part way around, so that the second form, coming directly after, hit Lansing on the shoulders and the back of his head.

His hat was knocked from him; he went down under the assault. The slashing barrel of a gun just missed his skull and bounced off his shoulder, numbing it. Then Lansing was on hands and knees and the man on top rolled forward over his head, freeing him.

He stumbled up, and met a charge from the other assailant—a looping blow that grazed his chin and snapped his head around sharply. Lansing struck out, felt a fist connect solidly with a heavy body and heard the grunt of wind issuing from between set teeth. He forged in a step, swung with the other fist and the man went down.

Now he could see his attackers, dimly. Apparently they didn't aim to kill him—must have orders instead to take him alive. That proved all too well the truth of Captain Sharp's suspicions; the officer had been spotted, all right, and now their enemies were intent on capturing, and gaining information from, the man who had been trailed away from his hotel room.

The one Lansing had thrown off his back was up again and driving in, thick arms grappling for a hold. He sidestepped, wrenching free. There was a rip of cloth as his shirt gave. He fought back with pummeling fists, hitting for the face. The big man backed away from the punishment; and in that instant, finding himself momentarily free, Dave Lansing whirled and started running.

He wanted to escape without letting his assailants have a fair look at him. Behind him a gun boomed, a bullet scorched overhead. They would kill, rather than see him get away; and he knew he made a good target silhouetted against the lights showing at the mouth of the dark alley. Now they were coming after him, their heavy boots pounding the mud. A second shot sounded, but it missed even wider than the first had done.

A moment later Dave Lansing had reached the intersection. The wider thoroughfare lay before him, all but deserted at that hour of evening. He saw a light democrat buggy and team coming along the rutted street, saw the pale outline of a face staring at him from the seat when he burst out of the dark alley hunting frantically for cover. Another shot sounded. Dave Lansing sidestepped hastily out of the light of a lamp-filled window. Somewhere a door banged open.

"Quick!" called the voice of the person in the democrat. "In here with me!"

There was little time to debate the invitation. Lansing darted forward. The buggy had slowed for him, but the moment his fingers found a handhold the whip descended on the team. As he hauled himself into the light vehicle it was already picking up speed, and he sank into the seat knowing his assailants had been left behind. There was no further shooting as they rolled off into the darkness.

"You saved my life," Dave Lansing panted. "I won't try to thank you."

When they were well beyond the point of danger, the driver slowed the team and turned to glance at him. It was Peggy Wal-

burton, of course; he had recognized the buggy, even as desperate need drove him to accept her unexpected offer of help. Now she said, "The glimpse I had of you in the lamplight looked familiar. I knew you were one of our men. That's why I called out."

She didn't ask any questions; likely she thought he had been involved in some bull-whackers' drunken brawl. Then another idea, even less pleasant than the first, crossed his mind.

This girl might know more than she pretended to, about the reason for that attack in the dark sidestreet. And even though his assailants had got no glimpse of him, he knew Peggy Walburton would be able to identify him now if she were of such a mind.

Well, there was nothing to be done about it. Dave Lansing said crisply, "If you'll slow down a second I can hop out here."

But she did not seem to hear him. She said suddenly, "You're the man I noticed today at the Grove, aren't you? The one who didn't care for grandfather's little talk?"

"I guess that's right," he admitted shortly.

"My grandfather is a good man," she went on, earnestly, "and honestly concerned about his men. I want you to know that. I admit he's wrong to think pretty speeches and sweet cider can tame a bull-whacker and make a gentleman of him. But that's just granddad's way. He's getting old, you know. You shouldn't condemn him."

Dave Lansing scowled in the darkness. He could see her oval face turned toward him a little as she talked, and he was suddenly quite uncomfortable. "I don't reckon my opinion matters so much, does it?" he cut her off bluntly. "Now, if you don't mind—"

Without waiting for her to stop he swung a leg over the wheel and dropped down into the street, caught his balance and stood there in the dust a moment watching the buggy as it rolled on into the night.

In spite of his rudeness to her, he found it somehow repugnant to think of this girl as having any part in this whole, dirty situation. There was small reason for hope; but, to the very last, he knew he would hang to the possibility of her innocence. . . .

NEXT morning, with river mists still clinging to the Missouri bottoms, the big twenty-wagon bull train hauled out of Greggsport loaded with goods for the Mormon settlement at far Salt Lake. Lansing knew some bad moments during the bustle of departure—especially when he came face to face with one of the men who had attacked him in the dark, the night before!

There could be no doubt about it. Lansing had felt the grip of those powerful hands, and moreover his own fists had left their mark on the heavy, brutish features. Sid Owen, the tough's name was. He stood talking with the train captain, Tug Brice, and when his glance crossed Lansing's it held there a moment, in a scowl that made the sergeant freeze inside with its possible meaning.

But then the glance slid past and Dave Lansing relaxed, deciding that he had not been recognized. There was a bad bruise on his own jaw, which he had tried to cover by neglecting to shave off the dark beard bristle. Otherwise he bore no signs of the struggle in the dark and confidence rose in him that there was, after all, small chance of his enemies spotting him.

Moreover, there was the added satisfaction of knowing that Peggy Walburton had not, after all, informed on him. That meant that the girl was not involved in the intrigue he was bucking, and Lansing felt strange relief at that certainty.

The wagon assigned to him contained a heavy loading of boxes labelled GROCERIES. He had had some experience with a bull team—enough, at least to hold his own with this outfit. When the long line filed through the muddy streets and out upon the westward trail, Dave Lansing caught a glimpse of Captain Sharp on the sidewalk, watching them pull out. The two men made no signal, as their eyes met. Dave Lansing, striding at the side of his team, regretted that there had been no opportunity to tell the officer about the attack last night; and he wondered what time would elapse and what things would happen before they would meet again.

For the first two weeks, there was no occurrence of note. The train rolled on day after day, passing Fort Kearney and heading up the flat, wide valley of the Platte. Isolated in time and space upon the broad

face of the plains, the twenty wagons began to weld into a small world to themselves—a world in which the word of the train captain, Tug Brice, was law.

Lansing quickly decided he had no use for Brice, but he kept his mouth shut and took his orders and there was no difficulty between them. The train captain was a loudmouthed, redheaded bully, and his closest cohort was the brutish Sid Owen. These two ran things with an iron hand, and an insolent swaggering air. Dave Lansing thought many times, watching them: *And such are the men the pious John Walburton chooses to represent him and boss his trains!*

There was brief trouble in the ranks, the fifth day out of Greggsport. It was a Sunday, and grumblings sounded among the tired bullwhackers as the usual order rang out at gray light for them to roll out of blankets and yoke up for the day's start. When Tug Brice saw them standing about, scowling and muttering, his face darkened and his voice lifted in a bellow, as one thick hand rested on his holstered gun. "What the hell's holding you?" he roared. "You heard your orders!"

He strode into a sullen knot of the teamsters, shouldered them apart and singled out a slim, goodlooking youngster who faced him scowling darkly. "You looking for trouble, Risley?"

"We were promised we'd get a rest on Sundays," Lew Risley told him levelly.

The train captain's lip curled. "Oh, you were? Reckon you want me to hold Sunday School, too, and mebbe read out'n the Bible? Come on, get the lead outa your pants!"

Risley made no move. "We know the agreement we signed on under. We all heard Walburton himself—"

A hard ball of fist smashed full against his face, laid him flat in the dust. Standing over him, Tug Brice flung a hard glance around him, raised his voice so that it rang clear across the oval of the wagon corral.

"Right now, you can just forget all that bellywash you may have heard Walburton spouting back in town. That stuff's strictly for the trade; it sounds good, but it don't mean nothing in the freighting business. Out here on the trail, Sunday's a day like any other. And you work seven days a week. Anybody else think different?"

He glowered challengingly around him, Sid Owen, in the background, waiting to back up his boss. Lew Risley lay prone in the dirt, rubbing his bruised jaw wordlessly, and there were dark scowls on the other weary teamsters.

They had counted on this promised day of rest! but there was no will for argument as they saw that promise broken.

Brice spat at the ground. "So! Get to work and yoke up and get rolling, then. We're covering twenty miles today—"

CHAPTER TWO

Death on the Prairie

THE TEAMSTER who handled the outfit just behind Dave Lansing's was a scrawny little Irishman named Duffy. He had trouble handling the heavy oxen and Lansing helped him yoke up his team sometimes; and from this beginning a friendship struck up between the two men. Lansing quickly gathered that Duffy had no kind of use for Brice and his segundo, and often had to smile at the little man's caustic comments.

One evening, as the wagons broke into two columns and circled out to form the corral, Lansing outspanned and shoved his team into the grazing herd. Plodding back wearily to his wagon, through prairie grass that swished at his boot tops, he found Duffy struggling futilely to unyoke his own bulls. But when he stepped back to lend a hand he quickly sensed that Duffy was suffering from more than his usual incompetence.

"Ah, 'tis me pal!" the Irishman muttered thickly, and his eyes were glassy. When he moved to make room he missed his footing and sagged against one of the patient oxen, grinning foolishly. Lansing caught the strong breath of alcohol. Duffy was very drunk.

Lansing got the teams unyoked for him, and returning to the wagon found the little man sprawled in the dirt with his back propped against a wheel. The Irishman gave him a happy grin. "Have a swaller of me medicine, lad."

Lansing hunkered down beside him, waving away the nearly empty bottle of forty rod Duffy ordered him. "Where did you get that?" he demanded. "Only last night

you were moaning about how long it would be before you could have a shot of liquor."

"Ah, but yer wrong!" Duffy insisted. "This ain't likker—sure, an' I signed the pledge, didn't I? 'Tis medicine, me boy! Fer me toothache, which was so fierce I thought it would be the end of me 'til I remembered all them boxes in me wagon. Then, 'Sure,' says I, 'there must be somethin' here to relieve a toothache.' And I prized up the lid and—"

Quickly, Dave Lansing swung up the big wheel and peered under the wagon's tarp. At once he saw the crate with its lid half off, and one bottle missing from its contents. The word "Medicine" was stenciled on the box. But that was not what the bottles held.

He stepped down slowly, his dark thoughts running together. He knew that this was yet another sample of John Walburton's lying and hypocrisy—this disguised load of whiskey in the merchandise of a man who railed against alcohol in any form. And there was another factor here; something that made this seem even deeper and more sinister, although his half-shaped ideas had not come entirely clear to him yet.

Lansing suddenly didn't like to think of what this discovery might mean.

Returning to Duffy's side, he knelt and took the bottle from him. "Listen to me!" he grunted, so fiercely that the Irishman's bleared glance hunted until it focused blankly on his face. "You've got to sober up, understand—and don't let anyone know about this! It's a wonder you haven't been caught already; you must have been hitting that bottle steady, all afternoon!"

Duffy made a gesture. "What the divil! Aye, and I reckon them Mormon's can spare a poor sick Irishman one li'l bottle of their medicine, can't they?"

"I'm warning you for your own good!" Lansing repeated, crisply. "Keep your mouth shut, and stay out of sight until you're over this jag!" But the little teamster's eyes wobbled shut, and he hunkered there frowning, his thoughts racing ahead.

His warning, he knew, hadn't registered on the man's fogged brain. . . .

THAT night Lansing was tossing in his blankets, trying to get the sleep that would not come despite the weariness of his body, when a sudden shot lashed out across the corral. He sat up quickly, reaching for his boots. As he rolled to his feet he thought about his sixgun and belt, which he had placed for safekeeping under the seat of the big freight wagon. But on some impulse he left them where they were.

Men were shouting in the firelit darkness, and running to gather at a spot at the far side of the wagon corral. There had been no other shots. From that Lansing's first thought—of the ever present danger of Sioux attacks—was quickly dispelled. But he heard Tug Brice's bawling voice, ordering every man in the company to roll out.

They gathered quuickly in various stages of undress, most of them clutching guns and rifles. Eyes still drugged by sleep stared at Brice, standing spreadlegged over a still form sprawled on the ground. Dave Lansing took one look at the dead man's face, or rather the bloody wreck a churning bullet had made of it; and something turned sick inside him.

It was the little Irishman, Duffy.

"All right!" Tug Brice bellowed at the score of men grouped silently before him. "The man is dead—and someone in this outfit killed him. Anybody going to own up to it?"

There was no answer. In that tense moment, the truth struck Dave Lansing that Brice must have done the killing himself, and was trying to cover up. He felt a violent urge to yell out, "Let's take a look at the gun in your own holster!" But he restrained himself.

It would have been easy to tell if Brice's sixgun had been fired within the last few minutes; and, as there had been only one shot, that would convict him. Something warned Lansing, however, that it would be better to keep silent and see what deep game the train boss was playing.

When no one answered his challenge, Tug Brice put a smear of anger across his thick features. "You're gonna be cute about it, huh? Well, I guess that don't leave me much choice. We can't have promiscuous killings in this outfit. I'm ordering the lot of you to check in your guns!"

There were growls of protest. Lansing heard the voice of Lew Risley lift above the others: "Damn it, that isn't reasonable!"

"No?" Suddenly Brice's weapon was leveled in his hand and behind him Sid

Owen stood ready to back him up. "I'm boss of this train and my orders stick. There'll be no private feuding in any train I manage. We're shorthanded; losing Duffy don't help any, poor excuse as he was for a bullwhacker.

"Drop your guns and step away from 'em—the lot of you. Knives, too, while you're at it!"

One by one, reluctantly, they obeyed the command and the gun that gave it authority. When the last weapon had clattered into the dust, Brice jerked his head at Sid Owen. "Check to make sure no one's holding out."

As Owen slapped at his clothing briefly with big paws and moved on down the line, Dave Lansing was glad he had left his own gun and belt hidden in the wagon. He knew not what impulse had led him to do that—every other man in the outfit, apparently, had grabbed up a weapon as he came running to investigate the gunshot that killed Duffy. Now, except for Tug Brice and his cohort, Lansing was the only member of the train that had a gun where he could lay a hand on it.

Brice had gathered up the collection of guns and knives, shoving them into a gunny-sack. "I'll keep these in the lead wagon for now," he growled. "You'll get them back when we hit Salt Lake."

It was unheard of—a wagon boss disarming his own men! In that moment, Dave Lansing knew that everything was adding up; and though he had no idea as yet what the final sum would be, he felt a certain cold surety that he was on the right trail and that he would have news for Captain Sharp, before this Salt Lake trek was finished.

* * *

Two days after the killing of Duffy the train formed corral near the bank of a pretty little stream lined with wild plum and willow. It was early in the afternoon to be making camp, but Lansing assumed Brice wanted to be near good water and this was confirmed when the wagon boss came along the line, speaking to each man in turn.

"We're stopping here for a day to check our equipment. We been makin' pretty good time and it's better to take precautions than to have a breakdown on the trail." His blunt boot toe kicked the spokes of one of the wheels on Lansing's wagon. "This damn prairie sun loosens up a wheel pretty bad. Better take that off and soak it in the crick overnight, to tighten it."

"Yes," Lansing replied.

He got the rig jacked up, got the wheel off and rolled it down to the water's edge where he submerged it. There was other repair work that needed to be done and he fell to work at it. Around him the encamped train was busy with work, as the afternoon lengthened out and shadows lay long across the plains.

By morning the cold water of the stream had done its work and the timbers of the wagon wheel had soaked and swelled again to tightness. Dave Lansing fitted it back into place, took the wagon off its jacks. He had no further chores waiting and as far as he could see the other men were also ready to move on; but time passed and the order to roll was not given. Dave got out some of his personal gear and mended it. He wondered what had become of Tug Brice. The wagon boss had ridden out early and had not as yet returned.

He put aside his mending, and stretched out under the wagonbed. He must have dozed off. He awoke abruptly to a sudden rattle of gunfire, and a scream of agony.

Limned against the sky, a mass of naked, shouting horsemen were pouring over a rise of ground and coming straight in at the circled train. They were Sioux, hideous in warpaint, and the first warning of them had been the opening volley from their rifles. In the corral one white man lay dead, and now the teamsters were shouting and running for cover.

Somebody cried, "God! Our weapons!"

Dave Lansing, rolled to his feet, was already clambering up the wheel of his wagon to lay hands on his hidden sixgun. He saw the others running frantically toward the lead wagon, to get the guns Brice had taken from them two days ago—and there was Sid Owen standing guard with a rifle leveled, the sight of him jarring them to a halt.

"Keep back!" the big man bawled at them.

Rifle fire was rattling against the encircling wagons as the Sioux party swept in. Lew Risley's cry rose above the knot of men halted, menaced by Owen's gun: "Dammit! What kind of a treacherous

double cross is this? We want only guns."

His words broke off as the rifle in Owens' hands lashed flame, and Lew Risley went down. The others broke, falling back. Through the echoes of the shot Sid Owen snarled at them, "Nobody touches these guns!"

Then Dave Lansing fired. His bullet took big Owen squarely; he buckled, dropped headlong off the high seat of the wagon. And at once the bullwhackers were scrambling up to recapture their weapons.

At that moment the tide of red raiders struck the circled wagons.

SOMEONE had grabbed Sid Owen's fallen rifle; that and Lansing's sixgun were all that met that first rush of the Sioux.

Driving straight in, the raiders had headed their ponies at the gaps in the corral, where the long tongue of each wagon was shoved under the rear axle of the one ahead. They came yelling and screaming, leaping their ponies across the tongues. Then the two defending weapons were opening up, meeting that headon plunge.

The leaders took bullets squarely and were sent spinning from their bareback mounts, slamming into the riders behind, or striking wagon timbers and dropping to hit the earth in sodden heaps. Their death cries were jolted from them by the force of lead; and as the first shots sounded the cries of all the raiders broke and changed, became shrieks of horror.

It was almost as though any sign of resistance was more than they had expected, and more than they could face. Those who had not broken into the corral checked rein quickly just outside, in squawling confusion. There they swerved and let their ponies take out their run instead in a great circle just beyond the ring of wagons. Some who were caught inside the corral plunged straight across it, leaping the wagon tongues at the other side. Dave Lansing dropped one of these as the warriors rode storming by, leaped aside to avoid the plunging hoofs of the wildly running Indian pony as its rider hit the earth, rolled once, lay still.

Then, whirling, Lansing was diving into the dirt beneath one of the heavy wagons, and wriggling into a prone position where he could fire between the spokes of a wheel. The encircling raiders were a blur of boiling dust, of shuttling ponies' legs. He got a bead, dropped another copper-skinned rider, saw the body flop into the churn of tawny dust beneath wildly pounding hoofs.

A bullet chopped into the dirt inches from Lansing's crouched shape; another peeled a sliver of wood frm the wagon timbers, close enough to make him duck. Those were good Henry rifles the savages carried, but they weren't getting much effective work out of them, shooting wildly from the backs of plunging, saddleless ponies. . . .

His sixgun was hot to the touch now. Its hammer clicked on an empty and he quickly punched out the spent shells, fumbled fresh cartridges from his belt and rammed them home. Behind him he heard a battery of weapons putting in their clamorous thunder. The rest of the teamsters had their guns and ammunition now, were in position and putting a deadly lashing fire at that encircling rush of red raiders.

And in that moment, Dave Lansing saw clearly that the raid had failed.

It was a small war party—much smaller than had seemed possible in that first spine-chilling sight of them sweeping over the hill. Smaller than would have been needed to break that defended wagon train. They had never expected to meet resistance, and now the surprising, deadly fire of the bullwhackers was taking a deadly toll.

Dave Lansing sighted carefully, and as the trigger bucked against his hard finger dropped another of them. Many a riderless pony was racing now with that yelling, screaming band.

A man gave a cheer somewhere across the corral; was joined by other voices. Then the whole circle rang with the yells of the teamsters, and with hoots and catcalls as the Indians suddenly broke and went scattering before the deadly bullets of the defenders. Silence filtered in, the swirling dust settled. And still holding his smoking sixgun, Lansing backed out from beneath his wagon and came erect, surveying quickly the status of the defenders.

Three were down for good. A number of others had bullet wounds of varying seriousness. But faces blackened with powdersmoke or smeared with blood held exultation, and something else—a grim seriousness.

Someone cursed and said, "We better keep our eyes peeled—those varmints may be back."

Lansing doubted that. He started at a run across the hoof-torn dust of the corral. He saw Lew Risley stagger to his feet, one hand clutching his side where blood made a horrible smear of red; and Lansing was glad to see that Sid Owen's treacherous bullet had not finished him. Then he had reached the huddled heap that was Owen himself, and turned him over.

Owen was dying, but he had a little life left in him. He stared dully at Lansing, with bloodshot eyes. Dave lifted the man's bloody head and shoulders, and holding him like that shot a quick command at the teamsters, who were crowding in. "Give him air! And someone fetch some water—we've got to try to make him talk before he passes out!"

The dying man gulped feebly at the dipper of creek water; his eyes came to a focus, and pain and bullet shock was in them. Dave Lansing said crisply, "All right, what about it? Are you going to come through with the details of this murder setup?"

Sid Owen said nothing—lay against Lansing's arm panting out his life, while the blood ran from the chest wound Lansing's bullet had put in him. Dave said harshly, "Had it occurred to you that by leaving you to guard the gun cache, Tug Brice put you in a damn good spot to be scalped yourself? What assurance did you have the Sioux could have told you from the rest of us?"

For the first time his words had effect. A frown other than the tightness of pain dragged at the dying man's brow, his eyes fierce and burning on Lansing's. The thick lips moved. "Keep talking. . . ."

"This wagon train was bait for that bunch of renegade Sioux. It's loaded with liquor and probably ammunition and other such things, which the redskins were to have in return for attacking and plundering the wagons, and massacring the crew. They knew we would be unarmed, and easy pickings for them, when they came sweeping down on the corral.

"The killing of Duffy was just the excuse for taking our weapons from us. My guess is that Brice killed Duffy himself, when the little fellow sobered up and realized there was funny business afoot. He'd found a case of rye labeled 'Medicine,' and included in a shipment supposedly headed for the Salt Lake settlement. And even Duffy had sense enough to know that a Mormon has no use for liquor!"

One of the teamsters exclaimed, "How long have you known about all this, mister?"

"I just figured it out when I saw the Sioux hit that ridge yonder," Lansing explained, looking up at the circle of grim and staring faces. He told them then who he was, and the mission that had sent him with this wagon train.

"This raid was part of a deep scheme—it was to touch off a series of reports of Indian atrocities on the Plains which would force the Army to strengthen its garrisons and thereby drain off needed troops and equipment from the battlefields of Virginia. It was a desperate, far-fetched last chance to try and help the South—and, incidentally, to line old Walburton's pockets with freighting profits. And you and I, scalped here without a chance to defend ourselves, were to be the goats!"

Into stunned silence, the voice of the dying Sid Owen croaked: "Write all that down, and I'll sign it! That's the way Tug Brice told it to me. But damned if I let 'em get away with—leavin' me here in the same trap. . . ."

Somebody dug up pencil stub and paper, and after Lansing had written out a hastily worded statement Sid Owen added his signature, in a trembling scrawl. It was his last conscious act. The pencil fell from his hand and he went limp, head falling forward upon his bloody chest. Dave Lansing let him down gently and then rose, folding the sheet of paper. He hunted out Lew Risley. "Are you hurt too bad to take this train on to Fort Ringgold?"

The hurt man shook his head, face white with pain. "I guess not. It ain't far."

"Roll her in and turn the wagons and contents over to the commanding officer. The Army will want them as evidence of Walburton's treachery—and they'll want the testimony of every member of this train."

Risley said, "I'll see that they get it." He added, "What about you, Sergeant?"

"I've got business at Greggsport. Probably by now Brice has had a report from the Sioux chief and will be on his way back

to tell Walburton of the failure of their plans. I've got to try and get there for a showdown, before they've found some snaky way of covering up!"

* * *

He took one of the company's saddle horses, and he pressed eastward. It was a long, hard, lonely ride. He grew gaunt and lean in the saddle, barely taking time to rest for brief, fitful hours; rolled in his blankets with the bronc picketed and pulling at the grass, and the vast starry bowl of the sky pressing down upon the empty, far horizon.

When he could he traded for fresh broncs —at lonely road ranches, Army posts, or on meeting the westward-moving wagon outfits. And each time he asked questions and learned that Tug Brice was a day ahead of him, burning up a dozen horses in his desperate haste to return to his employers with news of the failure of their plans.

It was a bearded, weary scarecrow of a man that at last sighted the lights of Greggsport, one evening, and rode in toward them through sultry summer darkness. Heat lightning played across the sky, lighting the dark face of the Missouri. Lansing entered the river town through a dim side street. He passed the office of the town marshal—the only law here—and half reined in. But then he went on, determined to find Captain Sharp first.

He left the tired bronc in trees behind the hotel, entered the building by a side entrance. He thought no one saw him come in. Nor did he meet anyone on the stairs or in the dingy upper hall. But the door of Sharp's bedroom stood ajar, and no light showed behind it.

Lansing hesitated, then pushed the door wide. Lampglow from the hall showed the room was empty. But a piece of paper propped against a lamp on the table caught his eye and he stepped quickly, brought it to the doorway and read briefly the note in Sharp's strong, familiar scrawl.

> Sergeant Lansing:
> If you should return in my absence, please come to the empty warehouse on D Street. You know the place.
> Captain William Sharp

Dave Lansing stood for a long time, frowning and considering the message. Yes, he knew the warehouse. It was near the Walburton freight yards—near enough, that a man might even have been able to spy on activities there from one of the dusty, second story windows.

He jammed the note into his pocket, turned abruptly and went down the hotel's creaking stairs. . . .

The big, vacant warehouse was a place of dust and booming echoes. Dave Lansing stepped inside and to one side of the door and stood like that listening, letting his glance combat the utter blackness. A rat scurried somewhere, and that was all the sound.

Obviously, there was no one in this big room. He went outside again, moved along the dark face of the building to the corner.

At the side there were steps, leading up to an outside door and the second story whose windows gave onto the wagon yard. The steps were in shadow and Lansing moved forward quickly, went up the rickety flight with one hand upon the guide rail. He stepped into a room littered with junk. Shards from a broken window pane crunched under foot. Dimly the black rectangle of another doorway showed opposite.

He crossed to it. Heat lightning flickering beyond the windows showed him, too late, the figure of the man lurking in shadows beside the opening. Lansing tried to duck, tried to jerk free the Army revolver from his belt. He wasn't able to avoid the sudden, clubbing blow of a gunbutt that descended upon his skull.

CHAPTER THREE

Guns in the Dark

HE DID not go clear out. But all the strength ran from him for a moment and he had no power to resist as the two of them fell on him and dragged him, heels squealing and scraping on splintered floor boards, across the hallway and through another door that swung open to receive them.

A lamp burned in that room, behind blanketed windows that kept any light from leaking through. The door was shut, and Lansing felt himself dumped heavily into a chair. The sudden transition from darkness made his eyes smart and ache. Blood was trickling in a hot, wet course down his beard-stubbled cheek, from where the gun's

sight had viciously ripped open his scalp.

He heard a confusion of voices, coming plainer as his head cleared. Someone said, "I'll get the boss!" "I'll get the boss!" The door opened and shut again, on footsteps that quickly faded. Lansing raised his head then, groggily.

There was a table in the dirty room, a few broken chairs. Cards and money lay scattered over the table, in the lamplight. Two men, gun-weighted, sat there, the game forgotten now.

And, tied in another chair, his face a mass of ugly bruises, Captain Sharp sat staring numbly at Lansing. "So! They got you!" he muttered. "They've been working me over pretty rough—finally made me write that note to you, for bait; but I tried to put a warning in it. I thought maybe you'd know something was wrong, when I signed it 'Captain William Sharp' instead of 'Bill.'"

Lansing's stare fell to his scuffed boot toes. "Sorry, Bill!" he muttered.

There was silence for long moments, broken only by the whisper of the cards as one of the guards gathered them and began to shuffle the deck, nervously. Dave Lansing's strength was returning after that sickening clout on the skull. He touched one sleeve to his cheek, wiping away the trickle of blood from the torn scalp. His gun had been lifted from him, he discovered; he saw it thrust into the belt of one of the guards.

The messenger returned quicker than Lansing expected. Tug Brice and Bob Cooper were with him. There was keen anticipation in the eyes of the cleanshaven young general manager of the Walburton freighting company.

"So we've got both of them!" he grunted. His glance touched Lansing for a long minute before recognition came. "Oh, I remember you. That day at the Grove! I had a feeling then you were going to give me trouble—but I didn't know how much. You're the one who eluded Sid Owen that night, aren't you? Well, you won't get away from us this time!"

Tug Brice suggested, "We can sink 'em both in the River, boss. The damned Army nor nobody will ever know what come of them."

"It won't be as easy as all that, Cooper," Dave Lansing cut in tightly. "The Army has its eye on you. It'll have an idea what's happened, if we don't turn up again."

Young Cooper gave him a twisted grin. His black eyes were cool. "My trail is covered. If worst comes to worst, it will be that old fool Walburton who'll take the rap. But I don't think there'll be any blow up. You've delayed things a little, is all. I'll have to send out another wagon train, make another deal with the Sioux—"

"It's too late to do the South any good," Captain Sharp growled. "They're folding fast."

"Oh, that!" Cooper shrugged. "I've already got their money—in gold, too; no Confederate shinplasters for me. The South can go hang, as far as I care. I've got bigger things on the fire.

"Matter of fact, those fools of Secesh agents backed out cold when they found out what I was planning. Too bloodthirsty for them! But with the help of a bunch of liquor-crazy Sioux dog soldiers I can start me an Indian war that will bring Walburton a fortune in Army contracts.

"It'll be more than he can handle, and he'll have to step aside to let me run the business. He doesn't know a damn thing about what's going on around him, anyway. And I've already got that granddaughter of his eating out of my palm. I'll take over the whole campany—and if there should be any kickback, which there won't, I'm protected by Walburton's name."

"Then the old man isn't in on this deal at all?" the Army officer exclaimed. "If I had known that, I'd have gone directly to him. . . . But it looks as though you hold the winning cards, now!"

"Naturally!" young Cooper smirked. "I dealt them that way."

"You're forgetting one thing," Dave Lansing put in, quietly. "Or maybe you didn't know. What about that raid that failed? Sid Owen made a complete confession of everything he knew. And the wagons with their fake loadings have been turned over to the commanding officer at Fort Ringgold. You aren't going to get around those so easy!"

The other's confidence wavered for an instant; Lansing could see the uncertainty flicker in his eyes. He turned, shot a hard look at Tug Brice, and the other quailed, backing up a step. "What about it?"

snapped Cooper. "You been holding back?"

"I—I dunno anything about this!" the wagon boss stammered. "I lit out as soon as I saw the men had their guns and that the raid had failed. I figured they'd take the wagons on through to your man at Salt Lake and he'd know what to do with the stuff." He added, "You ask me, I think this guy's lyin', about Owen confessing. I seen the guy shot, and he looked dead to me!"

"Well, maybe!" Cooper swiveled his glance sharply back to Lansing. "And maybe not! What about that confession—you got it on you?"

An ugly look twisted the other's handsome face, and all at once a shortnosed revolver came into his hand. "We'll find out!" He moved toward his prisoner, the gun directly on him.

In that instant the door of the room slammed open. A voice cried, "Hold it—"

Cooper whirled, sixgun swiveling for a shot at the gaunt form of the town marshal, in the doorway. Before he could fire Dave Lansing was lunging up from his chair, straight at Walburton's treacherous general manager. The gun emptied itself into the ceiling, bringing down dust and plaster, as Dave's shoulder hit Cooper's gunarm and deflected the bullet upward. He heard a medley of yelling; heard other guns crash, their noise a deafening racket in that cramped room. Then somebody doused the lamp on the table and complete, suffocating darkness clamped down.

Lansing was trying for a hold on Cooper's gunarm. The man broke away from him. Dave lashed out blindly in the dark, felt the other's chest give back before his driving fist. He smashed again, knew that his blow was good. Bob Cooper sagged against him, limply.

The gun, falling, hit Lansing's boot and bounced away. He let Cooper to the floor and groped, found it. There on one knee, he fired upward at a gunflash that he knew came from one of Cooper's renegades, over by the table. He shot, heard a scream as the second bullet found a mark.

In that dark confusion, it was impossible to tell friend from foe. Dave Lansing held up his fire, waiting. And then something struck him a heavy blow and he was falling sideward, pain inside him, conscious-

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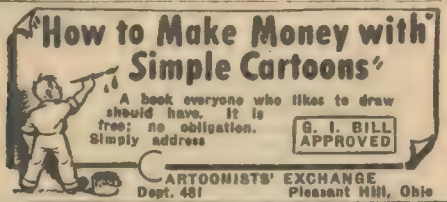
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ness flickering as he tumbled across Cooper's still form. . . .

He was in a room that looked like an office, and quickly guessed that he had been carried from the old warehouse to Walburton's headquarters next door. The room was full of men. A doctor was there, binding up the bullet wound that had been drilled through the flesh of Lansing's shoulder. It was painful, and the burn of antiseptic was in it.

Peggy Walburton, her pretty face pale and strained, had an arm about the bent shoulders of her grandfather, who sat limply staring at space. The revelations of this terrible night had been enough, Lansing supposed, almost to break the old man's spirit entirely. He heard John say, hoarsely: "I've worried about the morals of my teamsters—but it never occurred to me to look for treachery at the top of my organization. In the man who almost became my son-in-law. . . ."

"Don't worry about it now, Granddad," the girl murmured anxiously.

Captain Sharp came over to Dave's chair. The officer looked a little emaciated, and there were court plasters on the bruises where he had been beaten; but otherwise he showed few ill effects from his capture and imprisonment. He said, "I think you lied to me, Dave. About that note I left for you."

Lansing grinned tiredly. "Yes. I knew there was some reason for it being so damned and unnaturally formal; but I didn't dare say anything to tip off the guards.

"Before coming to the warehouse, I went to the marshal and showed him Sid Owen's confession, and arranged for him and his men to trail me, and keep out of sight. I figured we'd find you being held a prisoner. And I had an idea if we played it right we could bring this whole thing to a head and let our enemies convict themselves."

His eyes turned across the room as he finished. Captain Sharp, following the look, smiled but didn't bother to answer. That brownhaired girl yonder, smiling at Dave Lansing, was certainly enough to make any man think twice, before he let anything take him away from the attractions of this particular river port.

THE END

GUN THAT GREENHORN DOWN!

(Continued from page 81)

Peter tightened his grip on the carbine. Here was the time for action, he knew. But the minute he struck at McGarret and Wilson, he would lay himself open to attack from behind in the person of Borkly.

Peter judged from Borkly's voice that the lumberman was riding about ten yards back, to the right of the wagon. Peter slid cautiously from behind the tarp leaped groundward on the left side of the wagon, and flung himself behind a big bush.

The wagon rolled on up the trail, and here came Borkly, snapping out orders at his two gunmen.

Peter arose from his hiding place as Borkly flanked him. Borkly's horse reared back, startled. Borkly's hand snapped under his coat, sawing at the derringer in a shoulder scabbard.

Peter swung the long carbine at the man like a bludgeon. He felt the solid impact as the hickory stock slammed against Borkly's temple and crushed it.

Soundlessly, the man went back over his horse's rump, and sprawled on the trail. Peter grasped the horse's bridle with an agile hand, and cooed into the frightened beast's ear, stroking the animal.

He always had had a certain magic in him, in handling animals. Within two minutes, he was able to climb into the dead lumberman's saddle. He tucked Borkly's derringer into his belt, and went riding downtrail swiftly to overtake Showdown McGarret and Jack Wilson.

He overtook the two as they halted.

Peter rode casually, trying to sit the lumberman's horse as Barkly had sat it. But Showdown McGarret's hard eyes glimmered at him. "Hey, that ain't— Dammit, Jack! It's the pilgrim!"

Both gunmen grabbed for their guns. Peter's carbine spoke. Showdown McGarret pitched against the neck of his horse, then toppled groundward.

Peter yanked his left rein, and Borkly's horse moved swiftly in response to the signal. Wilson fired at precisely that moment. He yanked Borkly's derringer out of his waistband and tried a snap shot at the gunman.

The charge took Wilson in his arm, just as he was triggering a second shot toward Peter. His arm dangling, the gunman

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swore, snapped his left hand down toward his number-two holster.

Peter dropped the derringer and lifted his carbine. He triggered without aim, shooting by instinct. He felt a slug burrow through his skin, creasing one shoulder. He watched, panting, as Jack Wilson pitched out of his saddle.

SO IT WAS that, six hours later, the little goldstrike camp of Placer was treated to the eye-popping spectacle of a young New Hampshire pilgrim rolling into town with a load of prime, seasoned lumber, with three dead men making supercargo.

A man with a hooked nose in a flattened face helped Peter down off the wagon and said, "Figgered you'd be the one that'd make it, young feller.

Sol Granby pushed through the crowd and shook Peter's hand. "So you done in Elmo Borkly. Don't reckon this town'll hate you fer that, now. Ain't no law here in Placer. That's the main trouble." He squinted at Peter. "Mebbe you'd like to try on a law badge, Yerkes."

Peter said, "I'm a married man, Granby."

The merchant nodded. "Figgered you'd see it that way. . . . Placer'll grow, son, now Borkly's gone."

"I know," said Peter. "I've been thinking about that, Mr. Granby. If I could buy some of Borkly's wagons and stock, and—"

"They'll be up fer auction. I don't reckon Placer'll be biddin' against you, young fella, seein' you've done us all such a good turn. You're the natural heir to Borkly's lumber business."

Sol Granby was a big man here in Placer, *the* big man, Peter thought, now that Borkly was out of the picture. If Granby said Placer would not bid against Peter at the Borkly auction, it was a pretty sure bet that Peter could buy Borkly's buildings and supplies for a song.

"That sounds just fine to me, Mr. Granby," Peter told him, and climbed back on the wagon.

"Where you goin'?" Granby called.

"To tell my wife we're goin' into business." Peter grinned broadly, and clucked impatiently at the horses.

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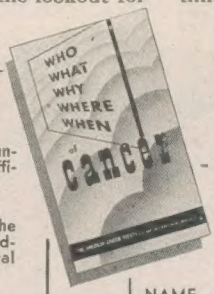
2. A painless lump or thickening, especially in the breast, lip or tongue.
3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



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